

# CAPTAIN LUCIFER



BEN·BOLT

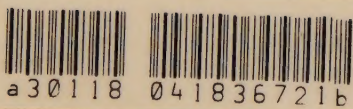




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# CAPTAIN LUCIFER

BY  
BEN BOLT

*Author of "The Sword of Fortune," "The  
Mystery of Belvoir Mansions," etc.*

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## DEDICATION

TO M. D. B.

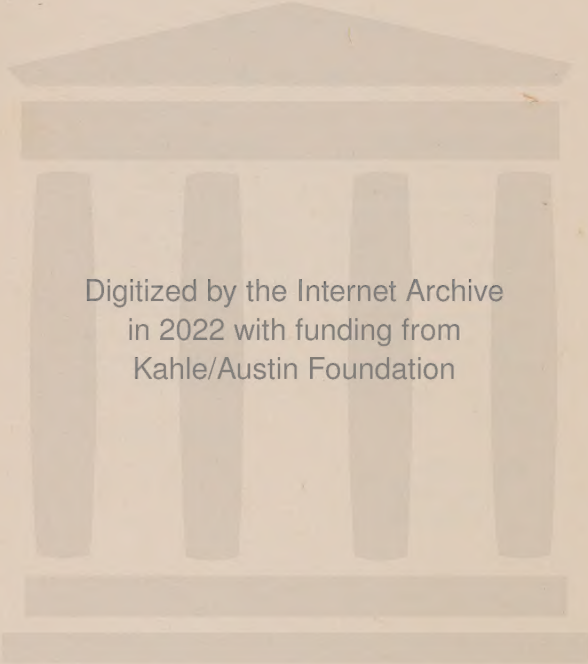
MY DEAR MAX,

You know the red roofs of Bay Town and you have drunk ale at the Inn where this Winter's Tale begins. Other places used in the narrative are also familiar to you, but Wyke House and the Priory you will try to recall in vain, for their stones are the stones of dream. But the tale is the thing, and here is one of the old Sea-Rovers which you are still young enough to enjoy, without looking the gift-horse in the mouth too closely.

BEN BOLT.

FIRCLIFFE,  
WATCOMBE,  
TORQUAY.





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# CAPTAIN LUCIFER

## CHAPTER I

### A LONELY INN

THE air was shrewd, and there was a flurry of snow in the sea wind as Sir Harry Plaxton halted his horse under the creaking inn-sign, and stared up at the symbol it bore.

“ A flask ! ” he murmured. “ A cheerful omen.”

Stepping from the saddle, he moved towards the door of the house and raised his whip to hammer on the panel, but checked in the very act as from within there came the shattering sound of a pistol-shot. Startled beyond measure, he stared at the oak, expecting some cry from within. Instead there reached him a harsh cackle of laughter, then the sound of a voice, which rang harshly :

“ Relight the candles, fool ! ”

There followed a brief interval, during which, as he supposed, the command was obeyed ; then the harsh voice sounded again :

“ Stand clear ! ”

Sir Harry smiled understanding. “ A shooting match ! But no reason why I should freeze.”

He made a fierce rat-a-tat upon the door. Almost simultaneously the pistol cracked again ; then there followed a silence broken only by the sough of the wind and the swishing of the driven snow. No sound came from the inn ; no one answered his summons. He stared at the front of the house, the shutters of which were closed, giving the place a blind look. A doubtful expression came on his face. The place was extremely solitary.

Behind it, across the fields, was the sea ; in front, shading away in the gathering dusk, rolled the wild moors, with no homely lamp twinkling anywhere ; whilst the rough coast-road on which the inn was planted ran back and forth with no other visible dwelling. For one moment it flashed on his mind that wisdom might lie in continuing on his way unrefreshed, then his native stubbornness impelled him to repeat his summons :

“ Rat-a-tat ! Rat-a-tat ! ”

As he ceased to rap, from within came a sound of shuffling feet ; then followed the voice he had heard before, imperious and harsh :

“ Stay, fool ! or by Heaven—— ”

The rest was left to his imagination, but there was no doubt of the threat, and he visioned a scared landlord hectoring by some tipling bully. That decided his next action. There was a staple and a ring in the house-wall, and in a twinkling he had slipped his reins through the ring, tied them securely, and had set his hand to the clumsy latch. Scarcely had his thumb pressed it when an eddy of the wind wrenched the handle from his grasp and flung the door open with a resounding crash. From within there came a startled feminine cry ; he caught a whiff of burnt powder, then without more ado he strode up the rush-strewn passage towards an open door from which came a splash of light. As he reached it a voice hailed him, peremptorily :

“ Stand just there ! ”

Prudence dictated obedience, as a single glance through the open doorway told him ; for seated near the table, with his elbow steadied on the arm of the chair, was a man in whose hand was a long pistol. The weapon was pointing directly at him, and in the candlelight Sir Harry caught the gleam of its silver mountings, whilst the man who held it, staring at him with savage eyes, looked resolute enough for crime. Two other pistols, a powder horn, and a bag of bullets lay on the table well within their owner's reach ; whilst, twittering like a frightened bird, a girl cringed against the panels, and an elderly man of

pallid complexion clutched the table for support, and stared beseechingly at the new-comer.

All this Sir Harry took in at a glance through the powder-smoke which spread a film over the room, then his eyes went to the mantelpiece, where stood three brass candlesticks, the dip in one extinguished, those in the two which flanked it still burning. Behind the extinguished one, on a level with the wick, there was a hole in the panel, and he smiled a little as he found this confirmation of the thought he had given expression to outside the house. Unquestionably the man with the pistol had been giving an exhibition of his skill.

"Who are you?" demanded the man truculently.

Sir Harry liked neither the fellow's tone nor the rudeness of his manner. He considered his questioner calmly without answering for a moment. The man, as was apparent, despite his sitting posture, was tall, of swarthy visage, with black hair, moustache, and pointed beard. His eyes were dark and hard, at the moment glowing fiercely, and the expression on his face was not pleasant. His dress was rich; on two of the fingers of the delicate hand which held the pistol sparkled jewels of price, and in the lobes of his ears gleamed golden rings.

He had just completed his observations when the man shouted again, bullyingly:

"Answer, fellow!"

"I do not see why I should," replied Plaxton quietly.

The answer stung the other like a whip, and he fairly roared.

"You do not see? By God! but——"

"Oh, answer, sir!" pleaded the landlord. "The man is desperate, and how shall I explain a dead man? My house will be ruined."

"I am not dead yet," laughed Sir Harry, "but for your sake I will oblige if that fool will put down his pistol—not before."

His eyes met the truculent one's in a level stare; and after a moment the other laughed harshly. "I can do without your answer, sir," he said, lowering his weapon.

"You are plainly not the man I mistook you for. I give you my apologies——"

"And these people?" asked Sir Harry suavely.

"Have they also your apologies?"

The man laughed a trifle scornfully.

"They can set down their hurt in the bill, and you and I will drink together."

"I do not see why we should," replied Sir Harry quietly. "I am particular in my acquaintance—though inns may force strange bedfellows on one."

The dark man's face flushed, but he laughed as at a jest. "Ah!" he said, "I apprehend you are to stay here the night?"

"A mistake," answered the other carelessly. "The words I used were but a figure. When I have refreshed myself and rested my horse, I ride forward."

"You go far?"

"To Bay Town," replied Plaxton curtly, and was surprised at the result of his words.

"The devil!" cried the other, fairly jumping from his seat, his dark face working, his eyes glowing with sudden suspicion.

"No, not to the devil, I hope," countered Sir Harry carelessly, though he watched his questioner alertly.

"Bay Town was the destination I mentioned."

The other still glowed at him doubtfully. "But," he said tensely, "you are a stranger there? I am sure you are a stranger."

Sir Harry laughed. "For once you are right. I have been at the place but once in my life many years ago." He turned from the man to the owner of the inn. "Landlord, my horse is outside tethered to your wall. Take him to the stable and unsaddle him and feed him. Then send me in some mulled wine and something to eat as quickly as possible."

"Certainly, sir," answered the man, and signalled to the girl, who fairly scurried from the room, followed almost as quickly by her master.

Sir Henry moved towards the fire, kicked the turves



together, threw his whip in a corner, and, dragging up a stool, began to toast his legs, outwardly ignoring the other's presence, whilst watching him surreptitiously. It was clear to him that the answer he had made to the man's last question had done nothing to lessen his suspicion. He stood up in the centre of the floor, the pistol still in his hand, his dark eyes flashing doubtful glances. Then abruptly he broke the silence.

"I am for the cove myself ; I was born there."

"Indeed," said Sir Harry, lifting his eyes from the fire, and looking at him curiously ; "then perhaps you can tell me something about the place ?"

The other laughed harshly. "I have not seen it these fifteen years, but——" He broke off and turned sharply as the girl entered with a tray, then finished his remark. "But if it is as it was—which, unless a miracle has been wrought, it will be—it is the most desolate hole imaginable."

"And yet you return to it ?"

"As a homing bird ! The claims of kin are not to be denied." The man paused, shot a questioning glance of which Plaxton was quite aware, and then asked a careless question : "And you ?—why do you, who are a stranger there, seek the Bay on a Christmas Eve, of all nights in the year ?"

He dropped the question in the casual way of a man idly curious ; but there was a glint of eagerness in his eyes and on his dark face, an expression which told Sir Harry that the man's interest was at white heat, and that behind the question was something unfathomable. He laughed a little, and being himself curious, to encourage confidence replied frankly enough.

"I go to take up an inheritance, and have a fancy to enter in my house on Christmas Day."

"A good Christian, hey ?" The man laughed noisily at his feeble jest ; but there was an indescribable relief in his words—a relief which shone also in his eyes, and which relaxed the tenseness of his manner. Then, still curious, but now no longer suspicious, he asked : "May one hazard

the guess that old Sir James Plaxton has been gathered to his fathers at last ? ”

“ You are good at guessing,” conceded Sir Harry. “ My uncle died eight months ago.”

“ I knew him well. He was a creaking gate when I left the parish,” replied the other, his manner suddenly cordial. “ I suppose the bronchitis carried him off at last ? ”

“ No ! He broke his neck out hunting.”

“ A happier end ! ” The dark man was growing more cheerful every moment. He laughed softly. “ There is no need for commiseration. One felicitates the heir when he succeeds. And we are well met, sir, for we shall be near neighbours.”

“ Indeed ! ”

Sir Harry’s manner was austere. He did not like the man’s sudden assumption of geniality, and had little desire for his friendship. Turning abruptly, he seated himself at the table where the girl had set half a cold goose, bread, a jug of hot wine, and a ripe cheese that stirred the appetite. He began to carve, whilst the wench, having finished one task, began to replenish the fire from a small stack of logs and turf in the corner, where Sir Harry had thrown his riding-switch. The other man took up a pistol and commenced to reload it, and had just dropped the ball in the barrel when the girl gave a little exclamation.

Both men glanced towards her. She was holding in her hand a cane of curious growth, staring at it in some amazement. Before she could speak the dark man had leaped forward and snatched it from her. There was a wild look on his face, and his eyes were blazing as, turning to Sir Harry, he fairly shouted :

“ You are the heir of Plaxton Priory, you say—but this is yours ? ”

“ No,” answered Sir Harry, wondering what maggot was biting the fellow’s brain. “ It is not——”

“ But you threw it in the corner when you entered,” shouted the other assertively, and now, whilst he

held the cane in one hand, his other hand gripped his pistol.

"No," again replied Sir Harry, thinking that surely he had to deal with a madman who must be humoured. "I threw my riding-switch in the corner. It is there still."

The man swung round, and saw that he spoke the truth ; then a sick, wondering look came on his dark face.

"In God's name——" he muttered, broke off, and repeated the words, "In God's name——"

A second later he began to beat wildly on the table with the cane, roaring wildly, "Landlord ! Landlord ! Quick ! or I'll blow seven bells out of——"

The host, a much-scared man, came hurrying in as the girl fled from the room.

"This stick ? " bellowed the man, thrusting it towards him. "To whom does it belong ? "

The landlord stared at the cane woodenly. "I am sure I don't know, sir," he began, in a worried voice.

"But you must know ! " shouted the other vociferously. "It was in the corner there, and this gentleman says it is not his. Who is the owner ? "

"W-why, sir," stuttered the landlord, "how should I know, never having clapped eyes on the——" He broke off sharply and a look of understanding came on his face as he cried, with relief : "It must be the blackamoor's who was here this morning."

The man whom he addressed was something more than startled. His dark face had suddenly a shocked, ghastly look ; his eyes burned with a very fever of anxiety.

"A blackamoor ! " he cried in a troubled, incredulous voice. "Did you say a blackamoor ? "

"Black as charcoal he was," asserted the landlord. "He called for a drink of rum, an' he must have forgotten that cane."

For seconds that seemed an age, the man stared at him like one who hears a thing beyond belief. Then he began to recover himself a little, the blood returning to his face ; but Sir Harry, watching him closely, saw that the hand

which held the cane was shaking, and easily divined that the man was in the grip of some overmastering fear.

"But—but," broke out the man at last, as if trying to convince himself, "the thing is clean incredible. What could a blackamoor be wanting at this wild end of the Riding?"

"The road to the Bay, sir. That's what he was wanting, that and the rum he——"

"The road to the Bay!" As he echoed the innkeeper's words in a hoarse, strangled voice, the blood ran from the man's face again. He dropped the cane and clutched wildly at his cravat as though it choked him, tearing it loose; and as he did so, on the whiteness of the neck below the jaw, Sir Harry caught sight of a ruby birthmark, the size and shape of a large raspberry. While the others watched, his breath came back, and, becoming aware of the landlord's scared interest and Sir Harry's curious eyes, he kicked the cane under the table and laughed noisily.

"Here's a fine to-do about a demmed blackamoor! Landlord, bring me brandy, quick! Jump, man; I must be taking the road to the Bay myself in a trice."

The innkeeper ran for the spirit, and the man, after a single furtive glance at Sir Harry, began to rearrange his cravat. That done, he thrust the pistols in his belt, and, when the landlord returned with a bottle and glass, he helped himself to a generous portion, and gulped it as a thirsty man gulps water. Then he spoke in his old bullying tone:

"My riding-coat! Quick, dolt!"

The landlord jumped to get it, and held it whilst his guest slipped it on. A second later the latter thrust a guinea in the innkeeper's hand.

"That will pay you. Now we will go saddle my horse."

"Your horse, sir," spluttered the landlord. "Your horse! Why, he's as lame as Mephibosheth—two legs gone——"

"Curse it, yes; but he must carry me on the other two. Come!"

He led the way from the room without so much as a

glance at his fellow-guest. The landlord, with a grimace, shuffled after him, and Sir Harry resumed his interrupted meal thoughtfully. As he ate, he conjectured what lay behind the scenes in which he had taken part.

Why should a man be so startled at a lonely roadside inn? Why should he be so manifestly suspicious on hearing that another man was travelling to his own destination? Above all, why should he be so scared on hearing that a blackamoor had called at the inn that day asking the way to the Bay?

The problem intrigued him vastly. Stooping, he retrieved the cane from under the table and considered it. He had seen the like before in the East Indies, and, as he balanced it in his hand, and found it heavily loaded in the head, he guessed that it was designed less for an aid to walking than for a weapon of offence.

“Who was the blackamoor to whom——”

The muffled sound of a horse's hoofs in thin snow broke on his question, and, as he listened, he thought to himself that the stranger's horse could not have been so very lame after all. The beast's hoofs clashed soundly enough, and it was cantering. The landlord must have been mistaken in supposing——

Another sound—the sound of a frightened man shouting frantically for help—cut his reflections in half. He rose to his feet just as the maid of the inn, blanched of face and eyes rolling with fear, appeared at the door of the room.

“Oh, sir!” she cried convulsively. “My father! My poor father!”

Sir Harry brushed past her and ran outside in the direction from which the sounds came. As he reached the road, he had a glimpse of a horseman hurrying forward under the rising moon; but, without staying to watch, he ran round the house to the stables, whence the cries seemed to come. The door stood open, with a lantern gleaming within, and as he entered he found the landlord, neatly trussed, lying on the floor. In a twinkling he cut the bonds which held the man, and swung him to his feet, and as he did so the landlord began to wring his hands.



“ Oh, sir ! Your mount ! That scoundrel——”

Emotion checked the man's utterance ; but Sir Harry guessed what he would have said, and a glance at the horse in the stall confirmed the guess. It had been a sound horse—his own horse—that had cantered by the inn window. He ran from the stable back to the road, and stared along its white length. Under the moon, and against the snow, the equestrian was still visible, a moving shadow between the white moon. Pursuit, as he knew, was hopeless, and as he thought that he must stay here for the night, he laughed a little vexedly.

“ Confound the fellow ! He must be in the devil of a hurry ! ”

“ Stuck his long pistol against my ribs,” moaned the scared landlord at his elbow, “ an' vowed by strange saints he'd blow my liver out if I didn't saddle the beast. When I'd done it he tied me up, an' swore horribly that if I cried out within ten minutes he'd come back an' murder all of us—the villain ! ”

Sir Harry took little notice of his complaints. Into his eyes, as they followed the man spurring up the road, there came a sudden eager light. He swung round to the innkeeper.

“ I must have a horse,” he said peremptorily. “ There must be one in the neighbourhood somewhere.”

“ A mile away at the miller's where the beck runs into the sea.”

“ Then fetch it ! I will pay any price. And there's a guinea for your trouble. That rascal shan't cheat me out of what I'd set my mind on. I must go to the Bay to-night.”

The innkeeper looked doubtful, but the sight of the guinea quickened faith.

“ I'll try,” he said. “ 'Twill be honeycomb in the mouth to be even with that rapsallion of a fly-by-night.” Without another word he turned, and, climbing a rough stone wall at the rear of the house, began to trudge across the fields in the direction of the sea.

## CHAPTER II

## A WAYSIDE ENCOUNTER

**A**N hour and a half later he returned with a stout, rough-looking cob.

"Here's the miller's beast, sir. No racing flesh, but sturdy an' good to carry you twice the miles you have to go."

"Then saddle up, just as quick as you know how, landlord," answered Sir Harry.

Within ten minutes he was astride the cob, riding down the moonlit road. The latter was a bad one, deeply rutted, the ruts frozen hard and difficult to see by reason of the powdering of snow, making careful riding necessary lest in a stumble he should break his neck. But the cob was sure-footed and picked his way with unerring instinct, and presently, as he rode between the silent moors, his rider gave himself up to reflection.

Who was the man in whose wake he followed? Plainly he was unknown to the innkeeper, yet if his story was to be believed he was not strange to this wild countryside. The fellow had said they were to be neighbours, yet in most unneighbourly fashion he had helped himself to his horse like any common thief. Perhaps he was that and no more—a mere tobyman hurrying from the runners or making for a Christmas rendezvous with his doxy. Yet, somehow he did not think either of these was the explanation of the man's action. There was a quality about him that no tobyman could have, and it was possible that his tale had been a true one, and that he was a homing bird making for his lift after fifteen years of wandering.

But what mystery was there behind the blackamoor, news of whom had thrown him into such a shivering panic? What secret was there in the man's life that the mere sight of a cane had awakened intolerable apprehension? He could not even conjecture, but that those things had awakened devouring fears in the man was unquestionable. That fact had been written large in his face, his whole demeanour, his unschooled violence, even in his

requisitioning of the horse. To the last act the man had unquestionably been hounded by apprehension and the need for haste.

As he rode on, considering the intriguing problem, he reached a point where a bridle-path broke from the main road, leading, as it seemed, to the heart of the moor. In the moonlight, between the half-concealed heather on either side, it showed like a white ribbon, but the surface, as he saw, was broken. Reining in the cob, he looked down and saw on the path the fresh imprint of hoofs. That the man who held his thoughts had taken that way he had little doubt, and, for the moment, he was tempted to follow him; but considerations of prudence decided him to keep to the road, and leave investigation until daylight, since for a stranger to lose himself on the wintry moors might mean death.

As he rode on clouds began to gather and the wind to rise. The moon was obscured and for a mile or so he rode in ghostly darkness; then came more snow, driving straight in his teeth, and veiling the view, so that he could not see a yard before him. The cob, born to the moorland weather, stepped on sturdily, keeping the road by a miracle, and when they reached a steep descent, sheltered by a little wood on either hand, half-way down, Sir Harry halted, and, with his mount against the bank, waited, hoping that the storm would blow over. Some minutes passed; then, through the swishing of the trees in the wind, he caught the grinding of wheels on the way he had come. He looked back quickly, and down the incline saw a dark body hurtling forward—a vehicle of some kind.

It passed him at a breakneck speed, a travelling-coach, with two horses plainly out of hand, for he heard the postilion shouting wildly as the coach went rocking by. The blinds of the vehicle were drawn, and whether it held anyone or not he could not see; but he followed it with his eyes until it took a sharp bend in the incline, and a minute later there reached him a wild shout, a crash, and a girl's scream of fear. In a twinkling he was pricking

the cob down the road with a recklessness that, but for the beast's surefootedness, must have spelt disaster.

He made the turn and looked eagerly ahead. The road was quite empty. He could see where it turned at the foot of the incline and began to climb the hill on the other side ; but no coach was visible. For a moment he stared in wonder, thinking that he must have dreamed, then across the road at the bottom he caught a girl's cry of fear. Clamorous voices reached him as he rode downwards—voices shouting fragmentary words that told him little, but set his heart pounding.

" A petticoat, by——"

" An' our gentleman not——"

" The postboy's broke his neck. Better scoot."

" An' let our bird go by ? Curse me for a lubber if——"

The wind grew suddenly most boisterous, the snow hurtling in his face hid the road from view—but with his pistol drawn and cocked under his cloak he rode desperately forward. He reached the bottom of the incline with the mystery of the lost coach unsolved ; then suddenly a voice shouted :

" Blazing flames ! Here's Lucifer ! "

A man rushed from the shadows and flung himself at the horse's head. The cob reared, almost unseating his rider, but as his forefeet touched the ground again, Sir Harry struck with the long-barrelled pistol. He aimed for the aggressor's head, but the blow, savagely delivered, fell on the wrist of the hand that held the bridle. The fellow bellowed with pain.

" Curses on——" The clouds about the moon momentarily broke, and the fellow checked his words as he caught sight of Sir Harry's face. " God, you're not——"

He jumped backward and ran for the shadows as the other levelled the pistol at him. There was a flash from the shadows, the crack of a pistol shot, and a ball whizzed by Plaxton's head. He set his horse at the fellow, but even as he did so a whistle piped somewhere in the trees, and a voice yelled a single word :

" Scatter ! "

The man who had fired at him leaped for the wood ; sounds of other feet crashing in the undergrowth warned Sir Harry against the folly of pursuit, and a girl's sobbing cry told him there were more paramount needs. He slipped from the cob and himself moved towards the shadows on the opposite side of the road, thinking that one of the footpads, as he deemed them, might be tempted to let off another pistol at him. As he did so, his hand touched something, and investigation revealed a stout rope stretched across the road, and in the same moment the mystery of the disappearance of the coach was solved for him.

At the bottom of the descent the road crossed a small stream, being carried over by a culvert, and from the lower side he caught a gleam of light. Looking down, he beheld a coach-lamp still burning, and in the little circle of light it threw made out the wrecked vehicle lying among the rocks in the water.

He saw other things also—the postilion white and still, lying crumpled in the bed of the stream ; one of the horses pawing frantically among the stones ; and the cloaked figure of a girl huddled on the bank, her face buried in her hands.

He waited a moment to make sure that the men responsible for the disaster were in full flight ; then, tying his horse to a tree, he climbed down the bank to where the girl was seated.

“ My dear young lady——” he began, and stopped as she started and lifted a troubled face.

“ You are not one of those men ? ” she whispered almost frantically. “ You——”

“ No,” he answered. “ I am a friend. You are not hurt by the fall, I hope ? ”

“ No, only shaken, but——

Her eyes went to the postboy lying in the stream, and she shivered.

“ Yes,” he answered, understanding her thought, “ he is beyond help, I am afraid. God rest his soul. But that horse——”



The girl's eyes went to the horse, which was pawing wildly and struggling to rise.

"The poor brute," she whispered. "He cannot rise. Can you help?"

"If you can—yes! If you can nerve yourself to kneel on his head whilst I cut the harness——"

"I have knelt on a horse's head before," she interrupted, "and though I am a little shaken, I can do what is needed to save that poor beast."

"Then——"

He held out both hands and helped her to rise; and for a moment, as she stood with the dim light of the guttering candle shining up in her face, he saw that she was young and very beautiful, and that her eyes, bright with compassion, were of star-like radiance. He was conscious of a thrill as he held the slender, gauntleted hands; he had a sense of wonder at her fairness; then, as he dropped them, he spoke crisply:

"You will have to wade into the water——"

"What of that if I save the poor thing from pain?"

Sir Harry did not answer the question. That she had mettle was proved by the fact that she had not fainted, and did not shrink from the task before her. He wasted no time in discussion.

"This way," he said. "Mind the creature's hoofs. A kick means a broken limb."

He led the way to the horse, still yoked to its dead fellow and struggling frantically to rise. Getting behind it, he dropped on its neck and held its head on the flat stone beneath it, which the water barely covered.

"If you will hold——"

The girl promptly knelt on the creature's head, and without delay he set to work to loosen it from the harness, cutting a strap when he could not reach a buckle. Two or three minutes sufficed for the task, and when it was finished he took her place at the horse's head again.

"Go to the bank," he commanded. "Get well up it. The poor beast may be frantic—and dangerous."

He waited till she was well away, then he rose, suddenly



gripping the horse's bridle, and helping it as it struggled to rise. In half a minute it was on its feet, a shivering, frightened thing. He soothed it gently, having a way with horses, and after a moment led it towards the bank.

"Oh!" cried the girl softly, "that is splendid." Then her face became suddenly wan and troubled. "But poor Myles there——"

"I will look to him in a moment. He is beyond the need of help. Get the lamp and hold it that I may get the horse up the bank to the road."

She obeyed him promptly, and he had the good fortune to find an easy way between the bushes to the level. Leaving her in charge of the horse, he returned, and, in the light of the glittering lamp, examined the postilion. The man was quite dead, and after lifting him from the water he laid him on the bank, and left him for others to deal with. The girl spoke quaveringly as he reached her again, and the lamp in his hand revealed the anxiety in her beautiful face.

"Myles—he—he is——"

"Yes!" he answered quietly. "There is nothing to be done. We must leave him for the present. Can you ride?"

"Yes!" she answered simply, still in the quivering voice that told him how she felt the death of her servant.

But she stood there shaken, yet erect. Her hat was lost, and in the lamplight her hair had the sheen of gold. Her face was very wan, tears glistened in her eyes, and he saw that she was biting her underlip in the effort to keep her emotion within bounds. His heart warmed to her as he saw her standing thus, but deliberately he kept all sympathy from his voice, knowing how that can loosen control when it is strained.

"Then things might be worse," he said curtly. "My horse is there. You can ride him and I will take the coach-horse. But first I must move this contraption, if you will hold the lamp."

The girl cried out in wonder at the rope. "Those evil men put that there?"

"Yes. But it was not to catch you," he answered quickly.

"No! I heard them. They made a mistake. But who can they have wanted?"

"If I may guess, it was a man they called Lucifer. One of them, mistaking me for another, shouted that name at me. . . . But this is no time to linger. And the snow is ceasing."

He flung the rope into the bushes at the far side of the road, and, as the moon broke clear, led the cob towards her. He shortened one of the stirrups, then, with a "by-your-leave," swung her into the saddle, and himself climbed on to the bare-backed coach-horse.

"Now," he said, "we will start. But pull your cloak about you, for the wind is shrewd."

Side by side, in silence, they jogged up the farther hill. As they reached the level, the moon, now quite clear of cloud, revealed her face, ethereal in its beauty, and made a golden aureole of her hair. His heart quickened a little at the picture; then, moved by curiosity, he broke the silence:

"Where is your destination?"

"My uncle's house—a quarter of a mile or more beyond the road to Bay Town."

"Good," he said, "my way runs in that direction. . . . It is your home?"

"Yes!" she replied simply, and, without knowing it, left him happy in the thought that they would be neighbours. The blustering wind and the state of the road checked further conversation. With bent heads they jogged on. Snow-clouds began to race over the moon again, occasional showers came across the open, blisteringly cold, and the girl pulled the hood of her cloak far over her head, hiding her face from view. But the sky was clear when at last they reached a junction of roads, of which one ran steeply down towards a huddle of houses, from the chimneys of which there was blown to them the pungent odour of burning wreckwood. In the shelter of a decrepit barn the girl pulled up the cob.

"Here is the village," she said. "You perhaps are going to the inn?"

"For the night only. To-morrow I go to my own——"  
A gate near at hand clashed noisily, making him look swiftly round. Less than a score of yards away a man rode in the moonlight, coming towards them. He looked once at the man, and began to laugh silently as he lugged out a pistol.

"Who——" began the girl whisperingly, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"Just one whom I have met before to-night," he whispered, laughing softly, "and who I am glad to meet again. That is my horse which he rides. Quiet! He comes straight for my ambuscade."

But scarcely had the words passed his lips when the girl made a gesture of warning, and whispered tensely:

"Oh, look! Look!"

Sir Harry followed her pointing finger and saw a tall man in the act of slipping through the gate from which the rider had emerged. In front of him, straining at a chain, moving with cat-like tread, was a four-footed creature that might have been a large dog. From the new-comer's stealthy movement it was clear that he was stalking the man on the horse, and as the former turned, so that he fronted the moon, with a sudden thrill Sir Harry saw that his face was coal-black. He looked at the creature straining at the chain which held it. There was something queer about its head—its face. For a second he stared wonderingly; then suddenly he realized the truth—the creature's eyes were hooded, as men hood a hunting-falcon.

Once before in the East he had seen a creature so hooded, straining at a light chain, and swift understanding came to him. That creature with hooded eyes was no dog. It was——

The thought was never completed. The black man had stopped. He was unhooding the beast. In another half-minute something terrible might happen. He shook with horror of the thing that he divined, and shouted to the rider in hoarse, desperate warning:

"For God's sake, look out!"

## CHAPTER III

## A STARTLED MAN

AS Sir Harry cried his warning, two things happened. The blackamoor leaped up, and, with the lithe beast at his side, ran swiftly back to the gate and disappeared from view, whilst his quarry, utterly startled, drew up his horse in the very shadow of the barn, and in the same second became aware of Plaxton awaiting him there.

"God in Heaven!" he cried, in sharp fear, as his eyes caught the gleam of the pistol in the other's hand.

"No," answered Sir Harry with a laugh. "Only the man whose horse you stole."

"Oh, you!" The relief in the man's voice was indescribable. He laughed noisily, then continued: "You startled me out of my wits. Perdition, man, why did you cry out like that?"

"There was a man stalking you with——"

"The devil!"

The man swung round in the saddle and stared up the empty road; then he asked unbelievably: "You are sure?"

"Quite sure. He came through the gate a little behind you. He——"

The girl's horse, deeper in the shadow, stamped impatiently, and apparently for the first time the man became aware of her presence, and again was thrown into something like panic.

"Who have you there? Quick, man, answer, or, by Heaven——"

He lugged at a pistol whilst he spoke, but whilst the words were still on his lips, and before Sir Harry could speak, the girl herself quieted his apprehensions.

"You need not fear me, sir. I shall not hurt you."

At the reassuring words the scared man swung from one extreme to the other. "Jupiter! A lady!" He thrust the pistol back, swung off his hat, and as he turned to

Plaxton, he was once more laughing with relief, his latest fear, with the one that had preceded it, quite gone.

"I did not know you had an assignation, or I would have left you your horse. I trust you were not over-late. It is a bitter night on which to keep a sweetheart waiting. I offer you a thousand apologies——"

"Get off my horse," broke in Sir Harry brusquely.

"But, sir, I have but a little way farther to go," protested the other, now quite self-possessed. "Surely you will let me complete my journey?"

"No!"

The word was emphatic, but the man did not so take it. He sat there, one gloved hand playing with his moustache, whilst, with smiling eyes, he considered the weapon in Sir Harry's hand.

"But if I insist? You would not pistol me before your lady. That would be crude and unmannerly. I do not want to carry these saddle-bags the half-mile or so which I have yet to go, and in the morning you shall find the beast in your stables at the Priory."

At the last words the girl moved so sharply that the cob was disturbed. With an upward jerk of his head he started forward, carrying his rider into the moonlight. At the same moment, the wind, getting under the girl's hood, blew it back upon her shoulders, and as she brought the horse to a standstill, the dark eyes of the stranger went to her in admiration.

"Venus! Here is beauty! A golden Diana—a——"

The next moment he had put the spurs to his mount. It snorted and pranced, and three seconds later its rider had set the girl between himself and the pistol and was riding up the road. Sir Harry drummed the coach-horse with his heels, and, as the beast moved forward, lifted a weapon to aim.

"Oh, sir," broke in the girl behind him, "I beseech you not to fire."

The laughter of the man up the road reached them in the wind, and Sir Harry, moved by mingled anger and chagrin, asked heatedly: "Why? Do you know the fellow?"



"No! But I should not like you to kill him. Also it is Christmas Eve, the night of good-will."

Sir Harry's chagrin vanished like smoke. He laughed as he glanced at the fleeing man up the road, who was already beyond pistol range.

"Why, so it is!" he said. "But twice that fellow has diddled me, and I do not like him for it. Yet——"

He thrust the pistol back into his holster; then he laughed once more. "The man may be honest; who knows? The morrow will prove it. In any case there is no reason why we should linger here to perish in the cold. If you will lead the way——"

"But, sir, there is no further necessity that you should ride out of your way. I have but a little distance to go."

"My lady," he retorted cheerfully, "I claim the right to complete my knight-errantry. Besides, there is the cob you ride. It is not mine, and, like that man there, I have promised to return my borrowed mount in the morning."

"As you will," answered the girl.

Without further words she began to move up the road in the direction the fugitive had taken, and Sir Harry heeled his coach-horse to her side. Together, for a time without speaking, they rode forward, the man occasionally glancing furtively at his companion. She had not replaced the hood upon her head, and in the moonlight, made all the brighter by the reflecting snow, he could see her face quite clearly. It was of elfin-like beauty, her hair glowed golden, and the wind, blowing her cloak free, revealed the lissomness of her figure—witchery in every line of it. Again he thrilled, as he had thrilled when he had held her hands in the dingle, and in that moment she turned to him and spoke.

"That man mentioned the Priory."

"Yes, he, as you heard, promised to send my horse there."

"Then you—you are the new owner, Sir Harry Plaxton?"

"At your service," he acknowledged with a laugh.

"But how did the man know?"



"We met at The Flask Inn. He made a guess at my identity, whilst keeping his own secret. But from his story he himself is no stranger here, though he has been away for fifteen years."

"Fifteen years!"

As the girl echoed the words an odd, thoughtful look came on her face, and he guessed that she was searching her mind for any remembrance of the man. She stared abstractedly up the snowy road, but did not speak again until they reached a pair of gates that stood open, leading to a house set on a slope and flanked by trees. In the very act of turning the cob through the gateway she checked it sharply, and, with wonder in her eyes, stared at the tracks in the snow.

"What is it?" asked Sir Harry quickly.

"Why, sir," she said in a troubled voice, "that man—that man——"

She pointed to the snow, and, looking down, he saw the tracks of a horse plainly marked there.

"Ah! You think he has come here—that this is his destination?"

"It must be," she said in a troubled whisper, the while she glanced back at the road from which they had turned.

"See, the snow is virgin beyond the gates."

It was, indeed, as she said. The surface, glistening under the moonlight, was unbroken beyond the gates, and the man who had fled with Sir Harry's horse had unquestionably turned in there and taken his way towards the house. He looked at her again. Her beautiful face betrayed mingled perplexity and anxiety, and it was easy to divine that the coming of the stranger puzzled and troubled her.

"You can guess who he is?" he asked quickly.

"Yes—my cousin! But it is incredible! We had word years ago that he was dead. I am afraid there will be trouble. My uncle is an old man, and they quarrelled bitterly before—before he went away."

Sir Harry marked the distress in her face, and sought to comfort her.

"Fifteen years is time for a quarrel to die and be decently buried. No doubt, by now, your uncle is ordering the fatted calf."

"I pray it may be so," she said, her voice a little tremulous. "Till to-night I have never seen my cousin, and I am remembering that he stole your horse——"

"Borrowed!" interjected Sir Harry promptly. "Doubtless he was anxious to reach home to-night."

"But that did not justify——" She interrupted herself. "It is a bad omen. The manner of his coming does not augur well for peace. My uncle is an austere man, and if he heard——"

"He shall never hear from me."

"No?" Her eyes, as they were lifted to him, gleamed star-like in the moonlight, and her face wore a grateful look that he found uplifting. "You are not like my cousin. You are magnanimous. My uncle will like you, and I——"

She broke off in pretty confusion. Sir Harry found the blood spinning in his head like rare wine. Hot, passionate words surged to his lips, to dam back which all his will was required, and, to help her over that moment of divine confusion, he laughed, though a little awkwardly.

"You are making too much of a small thing. Who am I that I should play the spoil-sport elder brother? As I said, your cousin may have been pushed to make home to-night."

The girl smiled up at him.

"Thank you! I must go now—alone! I may be needed—who knows? And my uncle will be anxious for me. Also, there is poor Myles." Her voice quavered, then steadied itself. "I think we might exchange horses. It is but a little way to walk——"

He began to protest, but before half a dozen words had been spoken she had slipped from the saddle and was standing in the snow. There seemed nothing for it but to let her have her way, and, dismounting from the coach-horse, he took the reins of the cob. She pulled off her

gauntlet and held out her hand towards him. He dragged off his own glove, took the slim hand, held it for a moment ; then, conscious again of mad impulses, looked into her face. Under the moonlight he saw the colour surge and her eyes fixed on him burningly, startled and doubtful, and half afraid. Then he set his heel on the temptation. Releasing her hand, he lifted his hat.

“ A happy Yule, my lady.”

“ Oh, if it might be—if I could believe——” Her eyes went to the house on the slope, then came back to him. “ To-morrow my uncle will doubtless send to you. He will want to thank you, and since we are to be neighbours——”

She left the remark unfinished, and, seizing the bridle of the coach-horse, began to lead it up the drive. Sir Harry stood to watch her. She reached a point where the drive made a bend, and there, for a moment, she turned and looked backward. He swept his hat in a bow, caught an answering wave of her hand, and then she disappeared from his view. He remained where he was—watching. Three minutes or so passed ; then at the house on the slope a door opened, and against the light that streamed forth for a brief instant he saw the silhouette of a girlish figure passing inside. When the door closed he climbed into the saddle, setting the cob's head down the road in the direction of Bay Town. As he went he hummed a sprightly air, and when the steepness of the way made it expedient to dismount and lead the horse he whistled like a man who found life very cheerful. When he reached the middle of the descent an old carol, sung by lusty voices, broke on his ears, and he found himself humming in harmony.

And so, to the sound of music, he came to the inn, and rapped upon the door to summon the landlord to take charge of the horse.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE "GOLDEN FORTUNE"

PETER HARLAND, his host, was a jolly man, who, if the plumpness of his figure was any evidence, lived with body well nourished and soul content. He was, moreover, a bachelor and a gossip, which last is true of most innkeepers, and, as he set an old brandy before Sir Harry and seated himself on the farther side of the hearth, he betrayed himself to be also of a curious mind.

"Yon's the miller's cob ye rode here." He commented, watching his guest with twinkling eyes.

"True! I found it necessary to seek the loan of it at The Flask Inn, or I should, maybe, have had to walk here."

"'Tis no night for walking i' th' snow, an' the road across t'moor lonelier than a churchyard in the ghostly hours."

Sir Harry sipped the brandy, and, measuring his host, gave the conversation a twist to suit himself.

"I did not find it lonely," he answered musingly.

"At 'The Flask' I met a gentleman who was coming this way."

"A gentleman?" The landlord's face betrayed eager curiosity. "A horse-gentleman?"

"He certainly rode a horse."

"But there could be no gentleman save yourself comin' to Bay Town to-night," protested Mr. Harland. "Who was the man?"

"I did not get his name," answered Sir Harry with an affectation of carelessness. "But I gathered he was no stranger to Bay Town, though it is fifteen years since last he was here."

"Fifteen years!"

"So he said. His destination was that house in the trees on the hill behind the highwood."

"The devil!" cried the landlord, his twinkling eyes suddenly wide with amazement. He stared like a man bereft of his wits for a moment; then he lifted a hand,

and, with fingers outstretched, began to count, ticking off each digit of the open hand with the finger of the other, the whilst he numbered under his breath. Three times he went over the fingers ; then he shouted in excitement :

“ Fifteen ! The very year, by Heaven ! ” He leaped to his feet. His rubicund face worked with excitement, his eyes fairly danced, and his voice was hoarse with excitement as he cried : “ What like was the gentleman ? Was he a tall, black-avised man, dark and keen of eye, lean an’ wi’ a lantern jaw ? ”

Sir Harry had his own curiosity to satisfy, and, as a means to that end, answered frankly :

“ He was certainly tall and dark of countenance, with a sloe-black eye that could kindle. But he was not lean, and, if he were lantern-jawed, the hair on his face concealed it. ”

“ That’s naught ! ” cried the host. “ Years alter the figure, as none knows better than myself, who once was lean as a sapling. An’ as for the hair upon his face, my gentleman may have lost his razors, or, more likely, the wish to use ’em. God-a-mercy, if it should be he ! ”

The man’s excitement was intense, and Sir Harry, watching him, realized that behind the emotion exhibited was some unusual thing. Suddenly he remembered what he had seen when the man in question had torn the cravat from his throat.

“ One other thing I can tell you, ” he said, as he leaned forward, the better to see the landlord’s face. “ The man has a raspberry birthmark on his neck. ”

“ By the Mass ! ” Mr. Harland fairly shouted. “ ’Tis my gentleman, sure enough, an’ by the Lord, if he be what he was, there’s sure goin’ to be gay doings in this parish of Bay Town. ”

“ But who is the man ? ” asked Sir Harry sharply. “ You seem to know him ? ”

“ Know him ? ” Mr. Harland laughed shortly. “ For sure I do, an’ so does every soul in the Bay that’s past twenty years ; for though the memory of the just be blessed according to the Book, ’tis the memory of the wicked be quick an’ lasting. ”



"But who is he?" cried Sir Harry. "Tell me, man? I want to know."

"Roger Passmore, son of Squire Passmore at Wyke House—that place on the hill—an' a very limb of Satan."

"Indeed!" Sir Harry's interest was at fever pitch. "But why should his return mean gay doings at Bay Town?"

The innkeeper laughed grimly.

"Because the man is what he is, that is if he be what he was, as is most likely, for can the leopard change his spots? Take a look at that picksher on the wall behind ye, sir."

Sir Harry rose from his seat, and, swinging round, stared at the picture in question. It was a crude thing in oils, and represented a great ship caught on a reef, what was left of her sails in rags, one mast gone and floating over-side, with hungry seas breaking over her deck—a forlorn sight. On the frame in small lettering was the inscription, "*Wreck of the Golden Fortune*." He considered it for a moment; then he turned sharply to his host.

"Tell me," he said brusquely. "What has this picture to do with Roger Passmore?"

"Everything!" answered his host tersely. "Fifteen years ago this Christmas night, when the snow was beating on the lattices, and the sea running up the street, the *Golden Fortune* was cast away on the rocks out in the Bay, and in the morning the shore was thick with wreckage—teas an' silks an' spices, whilst laid out in the street was a line of dead sailor-men who'd drifted ashore—poor souls."

The innkeeper paused, his eyes vacant, visioning, as Sir Harry guessed, the melancholy line of the dead, and as the man remained silent, he broke on his reflection impatiently.

"But in God's name what had the wreck of the *Golden Fortune* to do with Roger Passmore?"

The landlord came back from the past with a jerk.

"'Twas the cause of his exile," he said. "Come morning, when the bell was ringing for Chris'mas service, he rode forth from Wyke House Gate and from Bay Town—a man accursed—driven forth by his own father."



"But why?" cried Sir Harry, in some exasperation. "Get at the kernel, man!"

The innkeeper looked round as if to make sure they were alone; then his voice dropped to a whisper. "'Twas because in the night he had ridden the cliffs with a lighted lantern at his saddle-bow!"

"God! . . . No!" cried Sir Harry, staring at the man incredulously. He knew the lighted lantern on a horse was a West-Country wreckers' trick to lure tall ships to their destruction by giving them the impression of abundant sea-room; and he found the thought of such villainy on the part of a gently nurtured man beyond belief.

"'Tis gospel truth," averred Mr. Harland. "There's those who were in at the wild game still living here—though the damnable thing that was done is no trick of the Riding men. Ye see the Passmores are from the Cornish Duchy——"

"But how did the father come to know?"

"Young Roger sent the horse back to the Hall by a lad, who had the ill-luck to meet Squire Passmore at the gates. The Squire, who had news of the wreck, knew the horse for his son's, and the sight of the lantern set him thinking. He questioned the lad sharply, and sent him back with a message bidding young Roger repair to him without delay, whilst he himself took charge of the horse. 'Twas hours before the young rip obeyed; and then he was far gone in drink. What happened between the pair God an' themselves know; but an hour later young Roger rode past the top of the town taking the Scarborough Road, his chin on his breast and a black look on his face—fifteen years come church-time to-morrow morning."

For a moment Sir Harry stood staring into vacancy, with his mind's eye watching the guilty man riding across the snowy moor to exile; then he asked curiously:

"Has nothing been heard of him, meanwhile?"

"Seven years ago there was a rumour that he was dead—but none believed that, for five months later in this

very kitchen a come-by-chance sailor-man of these parts, tramping from Hull to Whitby, who knew him of old, swore he'd seen him in command of a ship in the Indies, and later had spoken to him again at Whydah Bay on the Guinea Coast, where by all accounts there were wild doings."

"Did he say on what enterprise Roger Passmore was engaged?"

At the question a stark look came on the landlord's rubicund face. He hesitated; then he broke out vehemently: "His tale was past belief. He was a drunken sailor-jack, a boaster, and I'll swear a liar in the grain."

"But the tale—the tale he told?" said Sir Harry, tapping his foot on the stone floor. "What was it?"

"By God, I will not tell ye!" cried the innkeeper vehemently. "The man's back, an' I'll not soil him with a fuddling blackguard's lie."

His guest eyed him narrowly, saw the set jaw, and knew that he would be stubborn, so forbore to press the matter, but asked another question.

"Did the sailor-man take his tale to the Squire?"

"Lord, no! If he had——"

He broke off tragically, and the look on his face told Sir Harry that here was some new dark mystery of the man who had that night returned from exile. But before he could speak again the landlord went on hurriedly, as if afraid of further examination.

"If it be true that he's back, then at this moment, and every day, Roger Passmore will have a reminder of his sin, for there's a lass up there that'll bring it to his mind——"

"You mean his cousin?"

"Cousin? Miss Catherine's no cousin! She's the one soul of the *Golden Fortune* who came ashore alive—a golden little maid of four, lashed to a spar. The Squire took her into his house, and she's been a very daughter and more. She's beautiful, clean, and bright, like a flame, with eyes bluer than ever ye saw in man or woman, with the sparkle of gems, an' when Roger Passmore looks

into those eyes an' asks who she is, as he will—before God I wouldn't stand in his shoes for a thousand guineas : for sure, 'tis thus his black sin will come home to roost."

The innkeeper was greatly moved, and for the moment his hearer was silent, seeing the tragic meeting of the two at Wyke House through the other's eyes ; then, whilst they stood, there came a sharp rapping on the door outside. The click of the latch followed, a gust of air made the candles wuther, and, as they swung round, a man appeared at the door of the room.

" 'Evening, Peter," he said, nodding at the landlord ; then he turned to Sir Harry, touching a forelock as he did so.

" There's a note from t'Hall for Sir Harry Plaxton. Ye'll be t'gentleman, ah expect ? "

" Yes."

Sir Harry stretched his hand for the note, and, breaking the seal, read the brief contents quickly.

DEAR SIR HARRY,—

I am commanded by my father, who is a little indisposed, to offer you the immediate hospitality of his house. It is not fitting, he says, that you, who are to be his neighbour and friend, should keep Yule night in a common tavern, and as he has heard under what deep obligation you have already set him, through your gallant service to my charming cousin, he desires you to come to us forthwith.

Assuring you of a cordial welcome,

I am, for my father,

ROGER PASSMORE.

*P.S.* My cousin prays that you will come.

*P.P.S.* I also add my supplications, and send your own steed, that you may ride hither. For my father's peace of mind, you will, I trust, keep secret the circumstances under which it was borrowed.

R.P.

He read the epistle through a second time, and made

up his mind quickly. Briefly explaining the situation to the landlord, and leaving an order for the return of the miller's cob in the morning, he turned to the lad.

"Where is the horse?"

"Hitched to t'post outside, sir."

The landlord helped him into his riding-coat and carried his saddle-bags outside. As he slung them in place his curiosity got the better of him.

"All well up at the house, sir?"

"Seemingly so."

"The Lord be thanked!"

A moment later he set his horse's head to the steep street, wondering what the night would yet bring forth, but finding an omen of good in the little postscript which expressed the girl's wish that he should accept the invitation.

## CHAPTER V

### THE BLACKAMOOR

AS he rode up to the house, the door was standing open, with the candles guttering in the wind, and the man whom he had met at "The Flask" standing to welcome him. The dark face wore a whimsical expression, and the man's greeting was without apology.

"So you have come, Sir Harry—and on your own horse—as I would have done had the chance favoured me. Come, the man will carry your bags in."

His manner was natural; he was solicitous for his guest's comfort, assisting him to take off his coat, and hurrying him to a cosy, panelled room, where a large fire burned upon the hearth, and where decanters stood upon the table with a bottle of Portugal wine half uncorked.

"This chair, Sir Harry. You can toast your shins in comfort. You will take a little brandy to make the blood quicken?" he said cheerfully. "The night is bitter."

"A little wine, I think, thank you."

"As you will. It is of a rare vintage, but my taste is

for the brandy. You will help yourself—and not stint.” He poured himself some spirit and held the glass until his guest was ready. Then he gave a toast: “A Merry Yule, Sir Harry, to both of us!”

He clinked glasses, and gulped the brandy like a fish. Then he laughed.

“I knew at that inn across the moor that we were to be friends, and here’s the intuition come true. ’Twas a scurvy trick I played you, but necessity is a sharp spur. I trust you will forget my action in that matter.”

His manner was light; there was a kind of exuberance about him, and it was clear to Plaxton that, whatever his going forth had been, his reception home had been a cordial one. Having no desire to spoil the man’s hour he replied carelessly:

“A small thing. I shall not remember.”

His gaze went round the room as he spoke, and Passmore, noticing, smiled.

“You are wondering why my father delays? You will not see him to-night. He suffers from the heart, and my unexpected return caused a little shock. My cousin also has gone to her room, being shaken by her adventures——” He broke off sharply. The lightness went from his manner, his eyes burned suddenly like coals, as he asked tensely:

“Sir Harry, who were those men who stopped her coach?”

“I do not know.”

“But you saw them? You saw them?”

“Only one of them—a fellow who gripped my bridle.”

“He was a seafarer, eh? Or—just a common footpad?”

The man’s manner was now urgent, apprehensive. His eyes betrayed acute uneasiness. He leaned forward in his chair, a tense, strained look on his dark face. Sir Harry, watching him, divined that much hung on the answer he should give, and he hesitated a moment before replying:

“I took him for a footpad.”



Passmore sank back in his chair and drew a breath of relief. The strained look vanished ; he laughed like a drunken man.

" A footpad. He will dance on air if he is caught ! But there were others ? "

" Several ! I heard them running away."

" Running, eh ? " The man laughed again ; then his merriment checked sharply as he remembered something. " But they did not rob my cousin, and that is a strange thing."

" They were not looking for your cousin, I fancy. Their rope was stretched to catch a particular bird. The man whom I saw when he gripped my bridle shouted a name——"

" A name ? "

He jerked forward, and his face took the tense look again, whilst his eyes flamed with something more than curiosity.

" Yes," replied Sir Harry, with an affectation of carelessness, though really much on the alert. " He cried, ' Blazing flames ! Here's Lucifer ! ' "

" Lucifer ! "

The laugh that accompanied the word was cracked and forced. To Sir Harry it was clear that the man had suffered a blow ; but, aware perhaps of his scrutiny, the other strove to hide the emotion for which the laughter was a cloak. " He mistook you for the devil ! That was no compliment. And after, of course, he ran ? "

" No ! He gripped my bridle, but when I had struck him, the moon broke clear and he saw my face. Then he realized he had made a mistake—that I was not the man he took me for. He said as much."

Passmore rose abruptly from his chair, toed the logs on the hearth together, then crossed to the table, and, picking up the decanter, renewed his empty glass with brandy. Whilst he poured it, he spoke over his shoulder :

" Who can this Lucifer be ? "

Sir Harry Plaxton made a silent guess, but refrained from putting it in words. The other drank the spirit



he had poured out, and, as he proceeded to refill it, the guest stooped towards the fire to light a splinter for his pipe. A second later there was a crash of glass and a hoarse, half-strangled cry :

“ God Almighty ! ”

Startled, he looked swiftly round. The shattered decanter lay on the oak. Roger Passmore stood with a wild, stony look in his face. The hand that held the glass shook so violently that the brandy was jerked over the lip and dribbled on to the floor. His eyes, fixed on the lattice, had a light of pure terror in them.

“ What is it ? ” cried Sir Harry sharply. “ What——”

“ That cursed blacka——”

He bit the word in two and lifted the glass to his lips. His tense grip broke the stem in his hand, and as the base fell tinkling to the floor, Sir Harry ran to the great window, and, after a little struggle with the catch, flung the lattice wide and looked forth. The moon shone on a white world, and far out on the sea a ship's light twinkled ; but in the garden nothing moved, and the terrace immediately in front was empty. He listened, but no sound reached him save the rumble of the sea.

Then he looked back in the room and spoke reassuringly.

“ There is no one here, Passmore. Your eyes must be playing you tricks ! ”

“ Tricks ! My God, man ! I tell you I saw——”

A light step beyond the door broke on the words. The catch lifted and the door swung open, revealing the girl, Catherine. There was a look of alarm on her beautiful face. Her eyes went to the broken decanter on the floor, to the open lattice, then to Passmore, still in the grip of the terror that had assailed him, and from him to Sir Harry. Then she cried in a stammering voice :

“ Sir Harry—my cousin—what has happened ? ”

Sir Harry was in no hurry to reply ; that, he thought, might well be left to Passmore. Deliberately he turned and jerked to the lattice, thrusting the stiff catch home, and wondering what explanation the other would offer. For a few seconds the silence in the room was profound,

but, as he finished the task and turned slowly round, it was broken by the girl's startled cry :

" Oh ! At the other window ! Someone—a woman ! "

## CHAPTER VI

### THE HAND AT THE LATTICE

**A**T the girl's startled cry, Sir Harry swung round swiftly and stared at her in incredulous amazement. She was in *deshabille*. Her hair was coiled for the pillow ; under the over-gown that she wore the lace of her night attire showed at the neck, and beneath the hem of it her small feet, thrust into soft slippers of scarlet, revealed the white slimness of the ankles. The blue eyes had a light of mingled amazement and apprehension, the ripe lips were slightly open like those of a wondering child, whilst her hand holding a candlestick so shook that the running wax was scattered on the oak.

All that Sir Harry noted in the single incredulous flash of his eyes ; then, whilst Passmore still stood there dumb, he cried to her doubtfully :

" A woman ? Surely you are mistaken ? There——"

" I saw her distinctly ! " broke in the girl, with a little impatient stamp of her foot. " She was staring at me and——"

Sir Harry turned swiftly and for the second time within five minutes flung open the lattice. This time he leaned far out of the window and examined the whole length of the terrace. There was no one there. The front was empty as last year's nest. He looked farther, examining each clump of bushes in sight ; listened for any sound of movement and heard none ; then he looked round again.

" There is no one. The garden is empty and still."

" But I saw——" began the girl protestingly, and then broke off doubtfully as she stared towards the window.

Sir Harry noticed her hesitation and had a sudden

inspiration. Crossing the room swiftly, he stood by her side and himself looked at the window.

"Hold the candle up—a little, Miss Catherine!"

The girl obeyed, and as she did so Plaxton gave a swift exclamation.

"Ah! You see, Miss Catherine? Now there are two faces at the window. A trick of the light, and that dark clump of bushes outside which turns the window into a mirror when——"

Passmore's laughter, forced and noisy, broke on the words, and he cried rallyingly:

"A pretty ghost, Cousin Catherine—the shadow of yourself! You must have been in your dreams when you came in the room."

Plaxton saw the girl flush, and then a little stubborn look came on the charming face, and a flash of suspicion shot into the blue eyes.

"But," she said, addressing herself to Sir Harry. "You were at the window when I came. You were looking for something—for someone?"

A sharp look of anxiety came on Passmore's face at the words, and had the girl chanced to glance at him her suspicions must have increased sevenfold. But her eyes were for Plaxton, who answered with forced laughter.

"No! One opens a lattice for other things than the view—to refresh the air, for instance. As you see, Miss Catherine, your cousin has dropped the decanter—a small thing to make so great a crash as that you doubtless heard. And since one may have too much of a good thing, and as the odour of brandy is apt to linger in a room, why——" He waved a hand towards the lattice, and laughed again with less strain. "A simple explanation. And it will be better to remain where you are. The glass is scattered all round and for softly shod feet the splinters may be dangerous."

The suspicion died from the girl's eyes. She laughed at her own apprehensions whatever they were; and her laughter in Plaxton's ears was like a chime of bells.

"Oh!" she cried. "I did not guess. I heard the

crash, and I was startled. That affair on the road has strained my nerves, I fear." Then she saw Sir Harry's eyes on the lace at her throat and in sudden embarrassment flushed divinely, and went on hurriedly: "You will forgive my foolish fears, cousin—and you, Sir Harry? I—I will leave you."

She turned abruptly, and Sir Harry jumped to open the door for her. As she crossed the threshold she looked back over her shoulder.

"Good night!"

"Good night!"

She passed on, whilst they were still bowing, and for a moment Plaxton stood listening to the soft tread of feet ascending the wide staircase. Then as overhead another door closed he shut the door and turned towards Roger Passmore, who laughed sharply.

"Perdition! But you have a nimble wit, and a quick tongue, Plaxton. For the moment I was fairly gravelled. But, Lord! what a beauty my little cousin——" He checked abruptly as a gust of wind, blowing in from the sea, slammed the open lattice, recalling his fear. "For God's sake shut the window!" he cried in sudden irritation. "We shall be blown from the room."

Sir Harry closed and latched the lattice, and Passmore laughed nervously as he kicked a piece of the shattered decanter.

"Here's rare liquor gone to waste! But there's a cruse in the cellar, still. Drink up, Plaxton, whilst I seek a fresh bottle."

On the word he hurried from the room, and as his steps died away, Sir Harry, still curious, reopened the lattice and looked forth. At that precise moment the tail-end of a cloud drifting across the moon darkened the face of the world. Dimly he descried the great cup between Raven Hill and the Ness, but details were obscured. He listened. Nothing moved; there was no sound save the rush of the wind and the distant rumble of the sea. His eyes narrowed their vision and stared at the terrace in the immediate forefront of the house. So

far as he could make out in the dim light the white stretch of snow was unbroken ; and he nodded to himself.

" Nothing but the vision of a sick brain," he whispered. " The man is strung taut with fear."

He continued to stare absently at the dim scene, ghostly with snow, until the sound of Passmore's returning steps reached his ears ; then, after softly closing the window, he went back to the fire. Just as he reached it the other re-entered the room, carrying a flagon of brandy in the hollow of each arm. Passmore closed the door behind him, set one flagon on the table, gave a fleeting glance at the window, then, as he drew the cork of the second flagon, laughed recklessly.

" Here's the antidote to care ! " he cried. " Let me help you, Plaxton. This cordial was old when I was young. It will warm the heart."

He poured a small goblet for himself, laughed scornfully when the other proclaimed his preference for the wine, and, drawing a chair to the fire, thrust his legs forward to the heat. Sir Harry took a chair facing the window and sipped his wine in silence, waiting for his host to speak. But the goblet had been twice filled and emptied before Roger Passmore broke into strained laughter.

" Two ghosts ! " he cried. " One black, one white—one a man, t'other a woman—both peeping in at a window ! Now there's the devil of a Christmas tale for you, Sir Harry."

His guest looked at him. It was clear to him that already the brandy was asserting its potency, awakening a certain bravado in the man across the fireplace, and he deliberately refrained from comment. Roger Passmore laughed again, a trifle tipsily, and cried rallyingly :

" Lord, Plaxton, you're a solemn owl for Christmas Eve ! This is a night for merriment, man. Let the good liquor flow and loosen your tongue. An' if you need an excuse for drinking—why, there's a pretty toast to help you ! " He replenished his goblet and lurched to his feet. " Catherine—my pretty coz ! "

There was that in his manner which stirred Sir Harry's



wrath—a levity and a familiarity which he resented fiercely. But the toast was one that he could not refuse without offence, so, leaning across the hearth, he clinked with the other, and drained his glass, setting it down empty on a stool which stood at his elbow. Then, with quiet deliberation, he re-charged the long pipe, and lighting it, puffed thoughtfully, staring into the blue flames of the wreckwood fire, the while he reflected on the story he had heard at the inn, and wondered if the man in the opposite chair knew the truth of that fair girl whom he named as his cousin. For his part, Roger Passmore had further recourse to the potent liquor, and then, as a buffet of wind shook the lattices and howled round the ancient house, he suddenly broke the silence.

“There’s the breath of old Davy Jones! . . . Plaxton, did you ever follow the sea?”

“Never!” answered Sir Harry, wondering what was in the man’s mind.

“There’s the life for a man! Ashore one is circumscribed, hedged round with laws and compelled to walk a narrow way. But afloat—why, the man who commands a tall ship is king or devil in his own right.” He broke off, laughed a little tipsily and softly began to hum to himself, tapping the time with his toe upon the oaken floor. Only a fragment of the words he hummed reached Sir Harry’s ears:

“With a ho! trolly-lolly for the rover’s blade,  
And a hey-nonni-no! for the maid’s red lips——”

The words became an inarticulate dribble of sound, then suddenly the singer stopped, a look of tippy gravity came upon his face, and he asked stutteringly:

“That man upon the road—the man you said was stalking me, what like of man was he?”

Sir Harry hesitated. Should he tell the man or not? He remembered the fright the man had been thrown into at “The Flask” by the host’s mention of the blackamoor who had called there; and again the more recent



apprehension he had exhibited when he had deceived himself into visioning a black face at the lattice, and remained silent. But the other, with the stubbornness of a man in liquor, insisted.

"What like was the man, I ask you, Plaxton?"

Then Sir Harry delivered the blow.

"He was a black man!"

"A black?" Roger Passmore rose staggeringly from his chair, and stood there swaying, looking at the other with wild eyes. "A black? . . . Did you say—a black?"

"Black as coal the man was. I saw his face in the moonlight!" He recalled the stalker's furtive manner, the hooded beast on the chain, and searching for the truth, he added: "He had a dog with him—a long lean beast——"

He got no further. Passmore flung up a hand as if to ward off some evil thing, and whispered in a hoarse, strangled voice. "That devil's hound! But they'll never let him use——"

He stopped sharply, as if suddenly aware that he was revealing secret things; then he had recourse to the bottle again, and a moment later he laughed a little desperately.

"That man——" he began, broke off and repeated the words: "that man——"

"Is no friend of yours?" said Sir Harry, encouraging confidence.

"No friend! But a d——d bad enemy!" Then he rallied himself and forced a laugh. "But what matter? I have the whip-hand of the black dog! There's no need for panic!"

He fell silent for a time, staring into the fire, and Sir Harry refrained from further questions. If the man would not give his confidence, then he would not force it; but as he sat there, smoking, and sipping his wine, he visioned again that scene upon the road, with the man before him on his horse and those furtive figures behind him stalking him—to his death. He gave a little shudder at the vision, and wondered to himself if he were exaggerating; if the suspicion he entertained were just a wild imagining of his own with no warrant in fact, or if it were stark and dreadful

reality. Then abruptly Roger Passmore spoke, his words a little slurred by the liquor he had taken.

"A man cannot roam the world without gathering to himself enemies as well as friends. . . . That black was once my friendly shadow—a very *fidus Achates*. It was when I was in the Indies——" He stopped, and blinked at his listener. "You were never there, Plaxton, I guess?"

He guessed wrong, but Sir Harry refrained from correcting him, in the hope that he would continue the confidence he had begun. In that, however, he was doomed to disappointment. The break turned the current of the man's tipsy thought. He began to talk of the Indies, of the wild doings he had seen there; maundering boastfully of dark things that chilled the blood of his hearer, and bragging of horrifying deeds, though it was not clear to Plaxton whether he had shared them or only heard of them from the lips of others.

The wind began to rise, buffeting the house, shaking the lattices. There came a rattle of hard snow against the panes, and whilst the fuddled man rambled on, Sir Harry became aware of a faint scratching sound. A mouse in the wainscoting, he told himself, and tried to locate the noise, but failed; and after a little time forgot it, his interest caught anew by the other's narrative. The man, it appeared, had been everywhere; had "shaken the pagoda tree" in the service of the John Company, traded for silks and teas with the pigtailed in China, and sold slaves to the tobacco-planters of Jamaica; but though Sir Harry listened carefully, never a mention did he hear of Whydah and the Guinea Coast, or any word that gave a clue to the secret the drunken sailor-jack had whispered to Harland, the innkeeper, and which with such passion he had refused to declare.

The scratching noise broke out afresh. It began to worry Sir Harry, getting on his nerves as such small sounds will. Again, losing interest in his companion's talk, he strove to locate it, cocking his ears now towards this part of the room and now to that. An extra loud

scratch drew his attention to one of the windows. It was there then, not a mouse after all, but some small twig rasping the glass and——

So far his thought got, then broke off sharply as though cloven with a sword. There was *something at the window*——something outside, which moved, a dim shadowy thing, scratching at the pane, moving, moving like the hand in Holy Writ which inscribed judgment on the wall of Balshazzar's palace. Like a dark hand—— He jerked suddenly to his feet, and as the truth broke upon him, he cried in amazement that was touched with fear :

“ It is a hand—by God ! ”

His words, his tone, his amazed look, all combined to penetrate the fog of liquor on Passmore's brain. He also lurched to his feet.

“ Perdition, man ! What's——”

From the window there came a sound of chuckling laughter, laughter of an odd sepulchral quality, which chilled Sir Harry's blood as he listened ; and then for the briefest moment he visioned a dark face pressed against the window-panes, the whites of the eyes oddly emphasized by the blackness of the skin, whilst they glared flamingly at Roger Passmore. The latter, suddenly aware of them, staggered drunkenly, though in truth at that moment he had in a sense become the most sober man in the Riding. All the potency of the liquor he had taken was nullified by the surge of terror within him. His face became ghastly, his eyes burned ; he stood there, gibbering, making little helpless movements with his hands, his whole form shaken as by an ague. Finally, out of the gibbering sounds some words broke clear :

“ A pistol—for God's sake ! . . . Get——”

But in that second came another burst of the sepulchral laughter ; the man outside shook a dark fist at Passmore as he stood by the fireplace ; his black face twisted with fiendish malignity, and before either of the men within could move, he disappeared, leaving the window blank.

Then Sir Harry, recovering his wits, started to run for the door ; but the other stayed him with a cry :

“ Plaxton——”

Sir Harry swung round towards him. The man was swaying, falling ; and though he leaped to save him, he was a fraction late, and Passmore crashed to the floor before he could reach him, and lay there in complete unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER VII

### FOOTMARKS IN THE SNOW

WITHOUT delay, Sir Harry picked up the unconscious man and, carrying him to a settle, laid him there ; then, remembering that the sound of his fall might have been heard by the girl, he tiptoed to the door and, cautiously opening it, stood listening for a full minute. No sound of open door or of moving feet reached him ; the house was still as the grave. With a sense of deep relief he closed the door and promptly set to work to restore the unconscious Passmore. In the first moment when the man had crashed to the floor he had feared a seizure had overtaken him ; but as he looked down upon him, and saw that his face was pale, his breathing inaudible rather than stertorous, he knew that fear was groundless. The man had merely been overcome by the tremulous emotion and shock he had experienced, and no doubt a little brandy would revive him.

He proceeded to administer it, and in a little time Passmore's eyes opened ; then he lurched himself into an upright position, and sat staring towards the window, where now the moonlight again shone, with stony eyes.

At last he spoke.

“ You heard ? . . . You saw ? ”

“ Yes ! ” was the laconic answer.

“ It was real ? The blackamoor was there ? ”

“ He was there.”

“ And he was there before when——” He broke off abruptly, and then, in a stricken whisper as if thinking aloud, he said : “ God ! . . . what shall I do ? ”

"I do not know what you can do," replied Sir Harry, "for I do not understand the business; but there is one thing that we can do—we can draw the curtains, and shut out prying eyes."

He crossed first to the window, against which the black face had been pressed, and dragged the heavy silken curtains across the panes; then he moved to the second window, and as he grasped the first curtain was assailed by a sudden thought. What if he had been mistaken? What if the woman's face which the girl had seen had been as real as the black face at the other window? The snow under the window outside would tell the truth. For a moment, as he stood with the silken hanging in his hand, he was strongly tempted to open the lattice and make sure; then conscious that the other was watching him, he decided that the proof must wait, and dragged the curtain along its pole, following suit with the second curtain.

As he turned, Roger Passmore lifted himself from the settle, and moved slowly towards the table and helped himself to more spirit. He had drunk much, but he was no longer tipsy or even moderately fuddled. The shock of the apparition at the window had completely sobered him, and the stark fear begotten had rolled back the fumes of liquor from his brain. He stood for a moment without speaking, then he glanced at the curtained windows and gave a mirthless laugh.

"You have shut him out in the night, Plaxton," he said gloomily. "But he is still there."

"Why do you fear him?" asked Sir Harry bluntly.

The words stung the other to futile protest.

"Who says that I——" He broke off, and then added: "Lord! I suppose the truth is pretty plain to you?"

"As an open book," was the answer. "But what's behind your fear?"

Roger Passmore did not immediately reply. Moving to the chair which he had previously occupied, he seated himself, and for some minutes stared blankly at the fire, whilst Sir Harry, taking the opposite chair, forbore speech,



waiting to learn if the other would offer any explanation. Then, when the silence seemed to be growing prolonged, Passmore broke it abruptly.

"That black who was at the window is a whelp of Satan's self. He seeks my life, implacably. He has followed me across the world to take it."

"Alone?" jerked Sir Harry.

"Oh, you are thinking of those others who stopped my cousin. . . . He is one of them; and not the first of them, but his private hatred and zeal to slay is as potent spirit to water by comparison. They will be content if they secure what they seek; but he—he will have nothing less than my living heart."

He spoke with such utter conviction that Sir Harry gave a little shiver, and the other went on musingly:

"Men talk of a woman scorned; believe me, the most bitter of such women to a primitive man consumed by hatred is like a purring kitten to a stalking tiger. That man is capable of burning the roof over the heads of all of us, in order to get me."

"That is very serious," answered Sir Harry. "Your father is an old man, and Miss Catherine——"

"Oh, they are in no immediate danger. . . . I have a secret which will save them and me—a secret for which those men burn."

"Then why not strike a bargain with your enemies? Why not buy them off?"

"Danegeld!" Passmore shrugged his shoulders. "That would be useless. When I had paid, the black at least would be no party to the bond. With the secret yielded he would have me stuck like a sheep. The secret is my protection—a very shield and buckler, if I can keep it. But there's the rub."

"I do not see——"

"No? Perhaps you have never seen a man tortured by a bow-string round his forehead, or by pieces of lighted tow between the fingers and toes? I have—and worse things. I have seen a man's eyelashes plucked out one by one and the eyes destroyed with hot irons. I have seen



a man's face so mutilated that he must have been a shrieking horror even to the mother that bore him, and I have seen strips cut from a man's living flesh——"

"Enough, Passmore!"

The other laughed fearfully.

"A secret may be locked in a human breast and men may think that is a safer hiding-place than all strong boxes or vaults with iron doors. But there are bloody keys that will open that hiding-place; racking terrors that will slip all bars, things that make a man cringe and shriek—and there is not a key upon the bunch of which that black fiend does not know the use."

He was silent for a moment, sitting with a stark look upon his face, then he broke out:

"And this parish is a lonely place. Anything might happen on this wild coast. When I came here I thought that in loneliness was safety. It was in my mind that in this God-forsaken spot I should have peace. Now I know that I was wrong. To hide a twig one should choose a forest."

Sir Harry stared at him in pity. What dread fear drove the man to such speech he could only conjecture from the words he had heard, and they made nothing clear, hinting as they did at mystery involved in mystery. At last he ventured on a question:

"Then you will go away?"

The words were like a spur. The man's sombre eyes glowed swiftly, and he kindled with sudden passion.

"No! by Heaven!" He smote the arm of his chair with clenched fist in his vehemence. "I shall remain. To flee would be vain; they would follow. But—by the Mass, yes! That is the way! I will meet force with force, blade with blade. I used to have power with the men hereabouts—and they are tough. Smugglers, seamen of bold heart. I will find that power again. With them to help, I will sweep this scum into the sea."

He was transformed by this new idea. His eyes glowed more brightly. The perplexed, tortured look was lifted from his face. It was clear that for the moment at any

rate he saw a way of salvation opening to his feet. He laughed suddenly, like a man unexpectedly delivered from the black dog of care.

"You must forget that you have seen me afraid, Sir Harry. After all, a man's own heath is the best place to meet his foes. It enables him to call the trumps and take the tricks. Glory! I was right to come to the Bay, after all. And I shall remain and fight the battle here." He broke off this exultant statement and added with a leer: "Besides, there are other inducements—and one of them a very charming one!"

"Your cousin?" snapped Sir Harry, conscious of a stab of fierce jealousy which was amazing to him.

The other laughed.

"You get my meaning. My father hinted his wishes within an hour of my arrival. And I shall be a dutiful son. It will be a new rôle for me—but my pretty cousin will help me to play it to perfection. There is no reason why she should not."

Sir Harry, glancing at the curtains he had drawn, thought he knew one; and as there flashed upon him the remembrance of Harland's story of the *Golden Fortune*, he was convinced of a second. To save himself from blurting it out he rose abruptly from his chair.

"Time we sought the sheets!" he said harshly. "Since you are delivered from your fears I will wish you good night, Passmore."

"No," said the other, rising sharply and with a swift glance at the curtained windows. "Not here! We will take our farewell up on the landing. . . . You—you are unfamiliar with the house."

The last, as Sir Harry knew, was the merest excuse. Whatever new confidence the man had found, he did not mean to be left alone in that room where he had known terror. Hurriedly, as it seemed to him, the other lit the candles and led the way up the staircase and along the gallery above. At one door he paused, and lifted a finger in warning. Wondering what was in the man's mind, Sir Harry halted and the other whispered:

“Listen.”

With his wonder growing, Sir Harry listened, and caught or thought he caught a sound of light breathing. Passmore flashed a meaning smile.

“My cousin’s room! A nest of innocence and of maidenly dreams. . . . And you thought I might run from such a treasure because of—those?” The man laughed silently, and then his face grew dark. “Heavens!” he whispered harshly. “No man shall drive me from such sweetness. Before that——”

He broke off, and with the candle lighting his face, Sir Harry saw that the man was shaken by passion as a little time before he had been shaken by fear. The sight of him standing there outside that door, his black soul sure that the treasure within was his for the grasping, stirred a jealous anger in Sir Harry. He could have struck the man, and afraid lest he should lose control of himself, he turned away quietly. The other followed him, played the host by ushering him to his room; and when the door had been shut on him, Sir Harry, feeling less like sleep than ever in his life, threw himself in a chair by the grate where a log and turf fire was burning.

There for a long time he sat reviewing the startling events of the night—thinking now of Roger Passmore’s story, now of the terror he had shown, and wondering what iniquity lay behind him; but most of all his mind was concerned with the purpose the man had unfolded. His anger burned again as he thought of that scene outside the girl’s chamber door. It would be a crime to let that fair girl marry this man steeped in evil, and already harried by mad fears of men who were perhaps not so evil as himself. Did the girl know the story of the wreck of the *Golden Fortune*? Did she know that Roger Passmore had been the instigator of that crime. If she knew would she agree—even to please the old man, her benefactor? In vision he saw her as he had seen her in the dingle, and again as she had ridden up the road, with her hood fallen back, and the moonlight on her hair and touching her elfin beauty to witchery, and his heart glowed.

“No! by Heaven!” he whispered hotly. “It shall not be. I—I myself——”

The sound of a door cautiously opened reached him, checking his thought. Then came a soft noise of feet moving furtively; they passed down the stairs and across the hall, and there paused. He listened intently, and caught the sound of bolts withdrawn; then the door opened and closed. Someone had left the house. Who?

He looked hastily at his watch and saw that it registered twenty minutes past two. Who had gone forth at that desolate hour on Christmas morning? Seeking an answer to the question, he hurried to the window and looked forth. He saw much, but nothing of moment, for his room was at the side of the house and though now the moon was shining brightly, giving a view of a wide stretch of snowy moor, it seemed empty of life.

He continued to watch, however, and at last saw a solitary figure moving over the snow a considerable distance away apparently carrying something heavy. The figure was too far off for him to identify it, but he had an odd suspicion who it was; and moved to prove his suspicion, he quietly left his room and moved along the gallery till he came to a door that stood ajar, the door, as he was sure, from which the prowler had emerged. The moonlight shone through to the gallery, and after listening breathlessly for a moment, he knocked softly. There was no response, and pushing the door open a little farther, he stepped inside.

The room was empty. A fire burned on the hearth, but the bed was undisturbed, and it needed but a glance round to show him the saddle-bags thrown on the floor, for him to know that this was Roger Passmore's room, and that he was the individual who had left the house so surreptitiously in the dead of night. Why had he, beset with fears though he was, gone out in this dead hour? What was it that he had carried with him?

Back in his own room, he asked himself these questions, without finding any sort of answer whatever, and at last,

wearied by a mystery that was beyond even a conjectural solution, he retired to bed.

When he awoke it was dawn, with a cold light striking across the greyness of the sea. There were sounds of movement in the house, and he heard a girl's voice singing a carol :

“ Joseph did whistle and Mary did sing,  
And all the bells on earth did ring  
On Christmas Day in the morning.”

He recognized the voice, and his heart warmed to the singer ; then he remembered something to be done, and in a trice he was out of the sheets and slipping into his breeches. In a remarkably short time he was groomed and dressed, and ready for descending. He listened, and then peeped forth. There was no one on the gallery, and the hall below was empty ; he would be able to slip outside unnoticed.

In a twinkling he was out of his room and descending the stairs. He reached the door, and lifting the great iron latch passed outside, as he thought, unnoticed. Then, as if taking the morning air, he strolled along the terrace indifferently, but with his eyes dancing, and his heart beating violently with excitement. He glanced once at the base of the first window, and saw that the snow was trodden by someone who had stood there ; but he did not stop to examine the place. His interest was at the second window ; and as he reached it, his heart almost stood still, for there also footmarks betrayed that some watcher had stood looking through the window.

Intrigued he stepped forward to examine them. They were small—the marks of a woman's shoes. Utterly amazed, he stooped over them, then straightened himself sharply as Miss Catherine's voice, a little rallyingly, broke on his ears.

“ So, Sir Harry ! It seems that my reflection in the window left footmarks in the snow outside. How do you explain the miracle ? ”



## CHAPTER VIII

## THE ROVERS' SYMBOL

THE girl was radiant, but there was a challenging curiosity in her eyes that gave Sir Harry a momentary feeling of discomfort ; then he laughed. After all, he knew no more about those footsteps in the snow than did she, and he had made his suggestion of the night before in perfect good faith.

" It seems that my explanation of last night was inadequate. You did see someone at the window, after all."

" Yes," she answered. " A woman ? Is it not so ? "

" These are a woman's footprints, certainly."

" But what woman ? " she asked, her curiosity growing. " And what was she doing there playing the part of Peeping Tom ? "

Sir Harry laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

" I am not omniscient, Miss Catherine." Then an explanation occurred to him. " Perhaps one of the maids suffers from——"

" No," she broke in. " They were all abed at that time. Besides, had it been one of them, the footmarks would have gone round the house to the rear entrance. But as a matter of fact they lead across the terrace and towards the gates. So it was no maid of ours who stood here last night to peer into the room."

Sir Harry's eyes followed the double line of footsteps—one going and one coming—and saw that it was as she said. Whatever woman had stood at the window she had certainly come from the direction of the gates. He whistled thoughtfully whilst he considered possible explanations, and then offered an obvious one.

" Some fisher-wife, perhaps, afflicted with overweening curiosity, who having heard of your cousin's return——"

" None of them would dare," interrupted the girl. " Also none of them could know of Roger's return. As you and I know, there was none to observe his home-coming except——"



She broke off. An absorbed look came in her eyes ; and Sir Harry, watching her, wondered who the exception was. Then she spoke abruptly :

“ There was that man with the dog who was creeping up behind him.”

“ You think he was a villager ? ” he asked carelessly, having no desire to discuss that incident seriously at the moment.

“ No—I—do not know what to think. It was a strange thing.”

To Sir Harry’s knowledge, it was even stranger than she could possibly think, but he did not say so. Instead he laughed with assumed carelessness.

“ That man is not the only possibility. Harland at the inn knew or guessed that Roger Passmore had returned. He gathered it from my talk, which really was quite harmless. He may have spread the news, for all innkeepers, by the nature of their calling, are gossips.”

“ Yes,” she said thoughtfully. “ Yes ! But what woman, hearing the news, would come up the hill on a bitter night to stare through the window ? ”

Sir Harry did not immediately reply, though a possible explanation occurred to him. Roger Passmore, in the years before his exile, had been no saint. It was possible that he had had an affair with some woman in the neighbourhood, and that she, hearing of his return, had allowed a natural curiosity to move her to this extraordinary proceeding. But there was another possibility which seemed to him at least as likely, and that was that with the men who were Passmore’s enemies there was a woman—who might or might not have a special and woman’s interest in Passmore. Neither of these explanations could be offered to the innocent girl standing there, with her hair blowing in the wind and her blue eyes alight with curiosity. He shrugged his shoulders, and laughed again, deliberately making light of the matter.

“ You forget I am not acquainted with any of the fisher-wives, Miss Catherine. You yourself should be able to guess.”

"I can think of none who would dare," she said thoughtfully. "Nor of any who would think to do such a thing."

"Oh!" he laughed, "you never know. There are women whose curiosity runs beyond all bounds. But in any case we shall not solve the mystery by standing here in this icy wind. Shall we walk?"

He spoke carelessly, and faced the direction away from the door, having in mind the footprints under the other window which apparently she had not yet observed. If, as he guessed, this terrace ran right round the house, it might be possible to get her indoors without having to answer further embarrassing questions, and when the chance came he might obliterate those tell-tale footprints. But his well-meant manœuvre was foiled.

"Thank you, but I must go indoors. My uncle takes his breakfast abed these days, and I wait on him myself. . . . In a few minutes you will hear the bell ring for the common breakfast."

She turned and began to walk in the direction of the door.

Sir Harry deliberately turned the other way and stood with his eyes in the direction of the sea. Would she observe those footsteps under the other window or not? He heard her light steps crunching the frozen snow, then the crunching stopped. A second or two passed, but he did not look round, until her voice, full of amazement, reached him:

"Sir Harry!"

He turned at that, and saw her beckoning him. She was standing by the other window where the other set of footprints were more broadly marked, and her whole bearing was eloquent of astonishment. Knowing that she had seen, he moved towards her, and as he drew near she pointed a slim finger at the trodden snow.

"You see?" she said excitedly. "You see?"

"Why, yes," he answered easily. "It seems that the woman who came a-spying brought a man with her and that they took a window apiece."

Her next action surprised him with a revelation of the astonishing quickness of her mind. Deliberately she turned and marked the direction in which the mysterious woman's footsteps came and went ; then she turned again, looked at the broad prints under the window and began to follow them across the garden. Sir Harry, wondering what was in her mind, followed her. The girl did not go very far, and for her purpose there was no need that she should. Tracking the steps, she reached the edge of a rough shrubbery, and then stopped.

" You are mistaken, Sir Harry. The woman did not bring the man with her. They came here from opposite directions. That is obvious."

It was, as Sir Harry owned to himself, but there was an explanation of that.

" But it does not follow that they were not together. To come here singly and by separate ways was the merest precaution on their part. One person can move more secretly and with less risk of observation than two at any time."

" Yes!" she owned. " Yes!" Then she shot a question that staggered him. " You knew that someone had stood by that window last night ? "

Utterly surprised, he did not answer immediately, and she went on : " When I came in the room you were by the window. It was open. You offered me the explanation that you wished to freshen the air—to get rid of the fumes of brandy. But there was another explanation that you did not give me, but which I can now guess. You had seen something—someone at the window. You were looking for that person. Is it not so ? "

Her blue eyes were challenging, almost accusing, and denial, even if he had wished to make one, would have been folly. The girl's quick mind had made the connection between events and facts perfectly, and it seemed wisdom to own it. He did so with a laugh.

" Yes, your cousin had a notion that he had seen a man's face at the window. It was then that he dropped the decanter. I opened the window to look for the man,

but he had gone—gone so swiftly, that naturally I thought Roger must have deluded himself—— And there was no need to scare you with the story.”

“ You think I should have been scared ? ” she asked.

He looked at her, remembered her courage in the dingle after the attack on her coach, and shook his head.

“ No ! ” he said, with earnestness and conviction. “ No ! I do not think that—of you ! ”

His emphatic statement brought a bright flush to her and a sweet confusion to her demeanour, which she tried to hide in laughter.

“ And yet you hid the truth from me as if I were a puling child to be scared by hobgoblins ! ” Then, before he could speak, she grew suddenly earnest, and asked tensely : “ What is the mystery, Sir Harry ? It has something to do with Roger—surely. There were those men who attacked the coach—they were looking for someone. There was that man who was creeping after him with that strange dog. The fact that he stole your horse—then those two a-spying at our windows ! What means it ? Tell me ! ”

There were other things that might be added to her list, thought Sir Harry, but he refrained from making the addition. As he looked into her blue eyes, earnest and anxious now, his one thought was to spare her knowledge of the trouble which, like a dark cloud, seemed to be gathering about Wyke House, so with all the conviction he could summon, he answered :

“ Upon my honour, I do not know.”

She believed him, and for that he was thankful ; for if her acute mind had probed him with questions he could scarcely have hidden from her the little that he did know, and the more that he conjectured. The girl stood silent for a moment, then she broke out :

“ It is for my uncle I am worried. Roger’s home-coming means so much to him, as you can guess ; and his health is delicate. If there should be any kind of trouble——” She broke off, and then cried : “ I must go to him. He will be waiting for me.”

She began to hurry back to the house, Sir Harry accompanying her, and as they reached the door, without having spoken another word, she slipped indoors ; whilst he, disturbed and curious, moved towards the window to consider those footsteps in the snow anew. He stood looking down at them. They were large prints made by the feet of a big man, and——

A movement within the room caught his eyes, and as he looked he saw Catherine, with Roger Passmore side by side, moving in the direction of the window. He was about to withdraw when something on one of the panes a little below the level of his chest caught his eyes. There were marks there, scratches that from the frosty whiteness of their edges had been recently done. Quite suddenly he remembered the scratching sound which had taken his attention on the previous night. That sound had come from the window and——

Oblivious of the pair within, he stooped to examine the marks on the diamond-shaped pane. The scratches probably made with a diamond, as he saw at once, had not been drawn at random, but they made a device. The lines were wavering, here and there they had plainly gone awry or overshot the indifferent artist's intention : but he was able to make out a pair of crossed pieces with an irregular blotch at the point where they intersected, though exactly what the whole thing stood for he was not at first sure.

The pair within had reached the window, and seeing him staring in, had their attention drawn to the device.

"Hullo, Plaxton !" cried Passmore's voice within. "What have we here ?"

Even as the question was asked, the idea of the thing came to him, as he suddenly remembered the device of the Papal flag.

"The Keys of St. Peter——" he began laughingly ; then the truth shot into his mind with stunning force. "No ! by Heaven ! the rovers'——"

He broke off sharply, and for a second stood there, frozen with amazement, his eyes not on the symbol but



on the face of the man within, which had a stark, ravaged look, the dark eyes wide with fear. The next second something happened to break the spell. The man took a step forward, seemed to stumble, and his hand, jerking forward in an apparent endeavour to grasp the frame, shot straight through the pane, splintering the glass with its odd device so forcibly that most of it was thrown outside, and giving Sir Harry barely time to duck to save his eyes.

He heard Catherine cry out in alarm, and standing up, as he shook a splinter or two from his coat, he saw Passmore wringing his hand, from which the blood was streaming. The girl cried out again, sympathetically :

“ Oh, Roger, you are hurt ! ”

“ It is nothing ! ” Passmore laughed shakily. “ A superficial cut or two——”

The girl was already running for bandages, as Sir Harry guessed, and for a moment the two men confronted each other. Roger Passmore had a white, strained look, and as he stared at Sir Harry was clearly troubled by the accusation in the other's eyes. For an appreciable time they stood so, silent, then Passmore broke the silence with an uneasy laugh.

“ The Keys of St. Peter,” he said, “ are devilish sharp ! ”

He glanced at his bleeding hand, and waited for Sir Harry to speak. But the latter, still with that accusing light in his eyes, held his peace, and the man within spoke again.

“ It was the Keys of St. Peter you said, I think ? ”

“ Yes ! ” answered Sir Harry brusquely. “ But I made a mistake.”

“ Ah ! ”

“ I should have said the skull and crossbones—the symbol of Hell, not of Heaven ! ”

The look on Passmore's face told him that he was altogether right in his interpretation, and the accusation in his own face grew more pronounced. But just as he was about to speak again, from within there came the pattering of high heels, proclaiming Catherine's return,



and in the same second Passmore, his face working, leaned forward and whispered hoarsely and peremptorily :

“ You will keep that knowledge to yourself, Sir Harry ! ”

“ I do not promise.”

“ If you speak ”—the man’s face grew dark with passion—“ I’ll cut your heart out, by —— if I don’t ! ”

The girl had re-entered the room. She carried strips of linen in her hand, and her beautiful face was full of solicitude as she hurried to her cousin by the window.

“ Quick, Roger, let me bind the hurt for you.”

Sir Harry caught the answering look on the man’s dark handsome face and turned away with a feeling of nausea. To see that innocent girl shaken by sympathy for a villain so black as he now conceived Roger Passmore to be was more than he could endure ; and remembering the man’s hints outside the girl’s chamber door on the previous night, he was stirred again to jealous anger. As he walked along the terrace there flashed into his mind again a remembrance of the innkeeper’s violent refusal to tell him what the wandering sailor had said about the enterprise in which he had seen Passmore engaged ; and now, without having been told, he knew. The rovers’ symbol scratched by the black upon the window like a key had unlocked that secret for his mind.

“ A pirate ! ” he whispered to himself. “ A bloody pirate ! ”

He reached the second window, saw the prints of the feet of the mysterious woman in the snow, and without any definite purpose turned to follow them. His brain burned with the revelation that had come to him. There were many things not clear : the pursuit of Roger Passmore by the men who had wrecked Catherine’s carriage on the previous night ; the cause for the implacableness of the black with his hooded, hunting beast whom he had seen stalking Passmore in the snow, and who had stood by the window scratching that dark symbol on the pane ; the odd coincidence of the presence at the other window of the woman whose steps he was following—but one thing was daylight-clear in his mind—Passmore, who fifteen years

ago had been driven forth to exile by his own father for a black crime, had spent some portion of the years between in even blacker crime.

"A pirate!" he whispered again. "There's the man's black secret! . . . And that girl——"

She did not know; could not even guess a thing so vile. Nor could that old man, whom he had not yet seen, and who, thinking his son's old crime expiated by long exile, had welcomed him back with open arms; and who, in the first hour of that return, had suggested a possibility of further expiation for which the son was already eager.

The line of the footsteps that he was tracking turned downhill into the shrubbery, making for the main drive. He followed them half-blindly, thinking of Catherine in her beauty and maidenly innocence handed over to a blackguard by a doting old man; and as on the previous night, he was moved to violent resolve.

"No! by Heaven, no! I will tell the old man; pull his house down about his ears, before the damnable thing shall be!"

Something gleaming in a bush immediately in front of him caught his eyes. He looked more closely, and saw that it was a small silver crucifix, hitched by the swivel that had fastened it to whatever chain had held it. He stooped to secure it, certain that it had belonged to the woman who had stared in at the window, for her descending footsteps passed close by the bush, and the trinket was free of snow. Whilst he was loosing it, he saw several small globular objects half-buried in the snow by the bush, and having secured the cross, he started to recover them also. He secured fourteen in all, carved beads of some dark stone, and as he stood with them in the palm of his hand he knew them for what they were—the beads of a rosary.

"A Papist!" he murmured. "The woman who stood by the window was that." He glanced towards the huddle of houses below that was Bay Town; then he nodded to himself. "It should be easy to find such a woman there!"

The sound of a bell at Wyke House reached him at that moment, and thrusting beads and crucifix in a pocket he turned towards the house, feeling less hungry for a Christmas breakfast than ever in all his life.

## CHAPTER IX

### RIVALS

**B**UT for the presence of Catherine Passmore, breakfast at Wyke House that Christmas morning must have been an awkward meal, for Sir Harry, remembering the other's brutal threat, was conscious of a hint of resentment ; whilst Passmore, fearing disclosures, was, at the beginning, ill at ease. But the girl, perhaps because she sensed a difference between them, kept the conversation going, though, consciously or unconsciously, she trod on the edge of thin ice.

" You have told Roger that I was not mistaken last night, Sir Harry, and that there was a woman at the window there ? "

" No ! " answered Sir Harry, a trifle curtly.

" But, Jupiter, was it so ? " cried Passmore amazedly.

" Yes, answered the girl, with an air of cheerfulness that puzzled Sir Harry. " Her footprints are in the snow ; we have seen them."

" But——" Passmore broke off, and then blurted. " In Heaven's name, who can it have been ? "

" You will have to leave that to Heaven, Roger, I fear," laughed the girl. " We cannot tell you. She is a woman of mystery."

" But I can tell you something about her," commented Sir Harry. " She is a Papist."

" A Papist ! " the girl cried. " Now how do you know that ? "

" By these tokens," answered Sir Harry promptly, producing the crucifix and beads and laying them on the

table. "I found them in the garden at a place where the woman had passed."

The girl looked at the crucifix a little wonderingly, but as Sir Harry saw, she watched her cousin between whiles. For his part, Passmore stared at the silver cross and beads frowningly, then he spoke in an odd tone.

"That is a strange thing! In old days there were no Papists at Bay Town."

"And there are none to-day," said the girl with conviction.

"That means that the woman who played spy at the window there was a stranger," commented Passmore, the frown on his face deepening.

"So it would seem," answered the girl, watching him closely under her long lashes.

"But in Heaven's name," the man demanded wonderingly, "why should a stranger woman want to spy on us?" He turned quickly to Sir Harry: "You have no Papist woman among your friends?"

"None!" answered the other curtly, checking the anger he felt at the attempt to fix on him the reason for the woman's nocturnal spying; then he countered quickly: "And you—have you none, Passmore?"

The man frowned darkly at the question.

"I am new to England after fifteen years' absence. What friends should I have among women here?"

"But abroad?" suggested the other. "You have known some abroad?"

"No!"

The word was explosive in tone, and the girl hastily intervened between them.

"And I have no acquaintance with any Roman woman, so the thing is a threefold mystery, and discussion will not help us; so, with your permission, we will put her from mind. . . . Sir Harry, when do you go to see your inheritance?"

"This morning," Plaxton answered. "As I explained to your cousin here, I have a fancy to enter on it on Christmas Day."

"You will ride over? Yes? But you will return here? You cannot spend a solitary Christmas. My uncle would never forgive me, if I allowed you to do that. Perhaps Roger will ride with you and see that you return?"

"I am sorry, Catherine," said Passmore brusquely. "But I have other business!"

"Business! On Christmas Day? Fie, Roger! But no matter, I shall ride with Sir Harry myself, if he will allow me——"

"Allow?" protested Sir Harry quickly. "I shall be delighted."

"Then it is settled. Cousin Roger rides on his Christmas business; you go to take possession of your inheritance, and I—I have a sick old woman to see in the town, where I can wait for you, Sir Harry. My uncle will not appear before noon—so we shall be company for each other."

Sir Harry found the prospect entrancing; but the black look on the other's face proved that it was otherwise with him. The girl could scarcely have been unconscious of the fact that she had thrown an apple of discord between the pair; but she chose to ignore the fact, conversing as if they had been David and Jonathan with each other, and a little while later left the room to dress for the ride.

For a minute or two after her departure, Passmore lingered at the table, crumbling a piece of bread and frowning savagely; then he gave a sharp laugh.

"So!" he said. "We are to be rivals?"

"Rivals?" Sir Harry could not mistake the man's meaning, but he refused to recognize it.

"Oh, d——n you, Plaxton, don't go round the mulberry bush. Do you think I'm blind? I merely want to warn you that my cousin is not for you. The thing I hinted to you last night is as good as settled."

"By Miss Catherine?" countered Sir Harry quietly.

"By my father!" retorted the other. "And my pretty cousin will fall in with his wishes—and mine."

"That remains to be seen," answered Sir Harry quietly. "She has, I should say, a mind of her own."



“ And an affection for my father that will make her a dutiful niece, as my own will disposes me to be an obedient son.” He rose from his chair. “ It is a fine thing when love and duty sing one tune. . . . You have the warning and I give you joy of your ride.”

He laughed shortly, and went from the room; and Sir Harry, from the window, presently saw him ride by the front of the house. Something glinting at the saddle-bow caught his eyes, making him look closely. It was the silver butt of a pistol, and he had little doubt that its fellow balanced the weight on the other side.

“ So,” he thought to himself, “ the fellow rides armed. And that is a strange thing in his home parish on a Christmas morning.”

He was still reflecting on the significance of that fact, when a patter of heels on the oak and the clink of a spur made him turn quickly. Catherine, booted and dressed for the ride, was standing in the doorway, wearing a scarlet riding-coat which showed the lines of her girlish figure to perfection. The three-cornered hat with its sweeping plume seemed to him the most becoming gear he had ever seen on a woman's head, and the smile in the blue eyes looking out at him under the brim went to his head like rare wine. He stood there dumb, entranced; and then a warm flush mantled the girl's face and a little hurriedly she broke the silence:

“ The horses are coming from the stables, Sir Harry. You are ready? ”

“ In one moment,” he said, moving towards her and the doorway.

She stepped aside for him to pass, and as she did so their eyes met. There was in hers a call that went straight to his soul. Passion—the pure incandescence of love—leaped within him like a flame. He checked in his stride, and for the briefest time they confronted each other, whilst hot words surged to his lips, but were not spoken. In that moment a veil was torn aside, and without reserve each heart knew what the other could not conceal. Then again the swift blood dyed the girl's cheeks scarlet,



and as swiftly ebbed, leaving it pale as marble. The blue eyes dropped quickly, and without a word having been spoken between them, he passed on, his heart lilting, all his being thrilling to the great emotion so swiftly born.

When, dressed for the road, he reached the hall again, he found her waiting on the steps, whilst a stableman held the horses on the terrace. As he emerged she did not look at him directly, and he was conscious of a new shyness in her bearing, a little reserve in her manner. One of the horses—the girl's—was restive, making the mount difficult ; and the groom holding its head made a suggestion.

" If I walked him to the upping-stock, Miss Catherine——"

" No ! " said Sir Harry, laughingly intervening, " there is a quicker way. . . . May I, Miss Catherine ? "

What he desired to do he did not explain, but she understood, and her laughter gave consent.

" Hold him steady, man ! " he commanded the man peremptorily.

A second later he lifted her into the saddle as he might have lifted a child ; and from the height of it, she looked down on him with laughing eyes, her reserve and shyness gone ; and the next moment, as the groom released the beast's head, she was leading the way down to the gates.

The wind was bitter ; the sky was clouded, the sea had a grey look ; but as he followed her, Sir Harry was the blithest man in the Riding. Not until they reached the place where the road forked, one portion leading steeply downhill to Bay Town, did either of them speak ; but there she pointed with her riding-switch.

" The parting of our ways, Sir Harry."

He looked at her quickly, an intriguing thought in his mind.

" Your old woman is very sick ? "

" Indeed, no," she smiled. " She is well on the way to convalescence."

" But she is expecting you ? "

"Not really. . . . I am afraid you will think me a dissembler if I speak the truth," she said with laughter.

"Shame the devil!" he laughed back.

"Well, you see"—her face flushed, but she confessed merrily—"she—was a good excuse for a ride this morning."

Sir Harry was moved to new laughter; then with quick urgency he said:

"Why not make the ride longer?" He saw understanding in her eyes, and went on quickly: "It has been my fancy for a week to enter my inheritance on Christmas Day."

"A pretty sentiment," she commented, her eyes on the sea.

"But I have a new one now!"

"What is that?" she asked, with the least apparent curiosity.

"That you shall enter it with me," he answered boldly, and as he saw the blood mount in her cheeks, he continued hurriedly: "It is a mile or more to the Priory. That will give you a longer ride, and——" He laughed cheerfully. "It is as good an excuse as your convalescent old dame."

"Why, so it is," she cried, laughing with him; and without more ado pricked her horse forward.

Sir Harry, light of heart, followed her. The way they took led up hill towards the height of the moor, in a fold of which the Priory was built—a lonely road, without so much as a cottage in the whole stretch of it; and with only a solitary farm in sight. They passed a stunted wood that had a black look in the snow, and on the upper side of it the girl halted her horse, and turned half towards the sea.

"We have a wide prospect," she said, with a sweep of her switch.

"Yes," he said. "It is very fine."

Momentarily his eyes rested on a black tongue of rock, on which the grey sea broke whitely. It was there, as he surmised, that the *Golden Fortune* had been wrecked; and fifteen years ago this very morning, the girl, now so

beautiful in early womanhood, had drifted ashore—a mite of human flotsam lashed to a spar. He wondered if she knew that story, or had her uncle by adoption concealed it ; and had he exercised his authority to ensure the secrecy of others ? The latter seemed the most probable ; and in any case it appeared from her attitude to Roger Passmore that she could not know the whole truth. If she were told——

A sharp sound broke on his reflections—the crack of a pistol, an utterly alien sound in that rural setting. The unexpectedness of it was startling.

The girl gave a little cry, and Sir Harry's horse reared at the sound and seemed inclined to bolt. It was a little time before he got the beast in hand ; and when he had succeeded he was aware of the girl staring with amazed eyes at the strip of moor above the wood, across which, as for dear life, a horseman was plunging recklessly ; whilst almost at his heels raced a long lithe beast that looked black against the snow.

“ Oh ! ” cried the girl suddenly. “ It is Roger ! . . . And that dog ! ”

“ Yes ! ” said Sir Harry grimly. “ It is Roger, but——”

The rider turned a little in his saddle, and his hand lifted. There was a spurt of flame, a little cloud of smoke, and then the sound of the explosion came to them. The pursuing beast stopped in its tracks.

“ Hit ! By the Mass ! ” cried Sir Harry.

A second later, however, he knew that he was mistaken. A whistle reached him faintly from somewhere in the wood, and the hunting beast began to run slinkingly towards the trees. Sir Harry looked at Roger Passmore. The man still rode as for dear life, and whilst he watched him, he topped a little undulation and disappeared on the farther side. Then he heard the girl's voice, startled and tense with fear :

“ Oh, Sir Harry ! What is the meaning of it all ? ”

## CHAPTER X

## THE HUNTING CHEETAH

SIR HARRY was in no hurry to answer the girl's startled question. In that moment he would have given much to have avoided answering at all. But refusal was not possible and in a second of waiting he decided that evasion must serve.

"The meaning of it?" he said lightly. "Why, it seems that your Cousin Roger has an enemy of an original turn of mind."

"You mean a man who uses that dog to pursue him?"

"Yes," he answered with a cheerful air. "But the beast came near to grief that time."

The blue eyes fixed upon his face gave him a feeling of discomfort, for with the revelation of her acuteness that he already had, he knew that it would be difficult to deceive her if she continued to question him. And it seemed that he was to have no respite, for almost instantly the next question came:

"But who is the man?"

He shook his head at that. "How should I know, Miss Catherine? Your cousin and I met only last night."

"But——" A clouded look came on the beautiful face, and instead of the question that he half-feared, there came an exclamation of perplexity. "Oh, it is all very strange!" She sat there, staring at the sea with troubled eyes, and he watched her with intense sympathy, tempted to tell her the stark truth, but fearing to increase her trouble. Then she broke out afresh.

"There was that attack upon my coach—those men were looking for someone. They were not even common footpads, for they left me my purse—my rings."

"You forget," he suggested. "They were disturbed by my coming."

"No, I do not forget that. I shall remember your coming always. But I do not think they would have robbed me if you had not come. They were looking for a man——"

"Whom they called Lucifer. That is not your cousin's name."

She ignored his interruption and went on, her mind clearly seeking the connecting link between isolated events. "Then there was that man and the beast following Roger in the moonlight, and those watchers—a man and a woman at our windows, with that secret device scratched upon the pane——"

"You saw that?" he asked in a voice that was a little tense, as he thought to himself that if she understood that she must understand all.

"Only imperfectly! What was the device? You were examining it."

"Your cousin asked me that," he answered slowly. "But the device was indifferently drawn, and as I told him at my first glimpse I took it to represent St. Peter's Keys."

"Your first glimpse—yes. But at your second, Sir Harry?"

The blue eyes were watching him keenly, and he had a fear that she knew or guessed more than she had revealed. Again he was tempted to tell her the whole dark truth, and a second time put the temptation from him. He laughed with a naturalness that surprised himself.

"There was no time for a second glimpse. Your cousin's unfortunate accident——"

"Destroyed something that he would not have us see too closely! I did not think of that at the time. But reflection brings other thoughts. Answer me frankly, Sir Harry. Is it not as I suggest?"

There was an appeal for candour in the blue eyes, a look on the beautiful face that he could not deny.

"I would not say you were wrong," he said, "but we have both to remember that the suspicion may be unjust. He may have been thinking of your uncle, who, if he had chanced to notice the device, must have been curious——"

"Oh, it is of my uncle I am thinking," she broke out a little pitifully. "He is so delighted with Roger's return, and if that should bring new trouble it will break his heart."



"I can understand that. But you have not reached that bridge, yet, Miss Catherine——" He broke off, and with an attempt at lightness added: "Neither have we reached my house yet. Shall we go forward?"

"Yes! We will not spoil your great morning," she answered soberly, and set her horse anew to the hill.

But the morning, as he knew, was already spoiled for him; and as he rode on, in his mind there was an anathema for Roger Passmore, who was not worthy of the least pang that clouded Catherine's natural gaiety. They reached the crest of the hill without any further words between them, turned to the left, and came suddenly to the Priory Gates embowered in snow-wreathed trees. They stood open, for Sir Harry's coming was expected, and they rode through and towards the house.

"It is the first time you have been here?" asked the girl suddenly.

"No! I was here as a boy sixteen years ago—the year before you came to the Bay."

"Now," cried the girl in surprise. "How do you know that which I did not know myself?"

His face grew hot as he realized he had been almost betrayed into an indiscretion, but he forced a laugh. "Oh," he answered. "Innkeeper Harland is a gossip. He told me last night that it was fifteen years since you came to your uncle."

A little perplexed look came on Catherine's face. "Do you know I have no remembrance of my arrival here? Always I seem to have been with my uncle at Wyke House. I cannot remember any time before; but there are nights when in my dreams I see a tall ship, and usually I awake in terror. I have sometimes wondered if there my earliest childhood were repeating itself, but Uncle Roger laughs at the notion."

"Dreams are strange things!" he commented lightly, thinking to himself that here was the question he had asked himself answered. The tragic story of the *Golden Fortune* had been kept secret from her. Except for the shadowy hint her dreams afforded, and to which she had

not the key, she knew nothing. Then he laughed. "But I do not complain of their strangeness, for here's a dream of my own come true—almost."

The girl looked at him a little wonderingly, and taking his courage in both hands he explained. "In my youth I was a visionary. I read tales and ballads till my head was stuffed with romantic nonsense, and, like many others, I saw myself the hero of them all. There was one especially that I loved; one of a great lover who on a wild night rode to his castle, after lurid adventures, with the lady of his heart upon his saddle-bow——" He stopped, as he caught the look upon the girl's face, and then added a little lamely: "He was my great hero. I used to dream that I was he."

"But—but," stammered the girl, "I do not quite see the connection. You said that here was your dream come true—almost!"

"Yes," he answered quickly, "always in that dream it was to this house I rode—and, well, here I am riding with you into my castle!"

"Oh!" she whispered. Her face was suffused. There was a tumultuous light in the blue eyes as they met his own, and for a moment there was no other word. Then she laughed gaily. "But this is not the fulfilment of your dream."

"It is the nearest I have known!" he answered earnestly.

"But the lady—the lady was in your arms, at your saddle-bow . . . and the night was wild, you said——"

"Last night was wild enough—in more ways than one!"

"And there were adventures," she said smilingly, "lurid enough for my taste. There the parallel holds, but—but——" She caught the earnest look in his eyes, and lost her smiling self-control. Her face flushed and paled; she looked down at her horse's neck, then towards the creeper-grown house; anywhere but at his eyes, knowing that she could not meet them.

Then he spoke again:

"I seem to have known you ages——"

" Since last night," she interjected.

" What is mere time ? " he cried scornfully. " A day or a thousand years are one where the coming of love is concerned. Last night in the dingle, when I took your hands to help you, I knew. When I saw you riding so bravely in the moonlight after that trial of courage, I was sure ; and this morning, as I passed you, deep cried out to deep ! Was it not so ? "

He waited, watching the quick blood come and go in her face, impatiently aware that at the house door a line of servants was gathering and that his moment was passing with every thud of the horse's hoofs.

" Quick ! " he whispered passionately. " Answer me, Catherine. Was it not so ? "

She also saw the crowding handful of servants in the doorway, and was smitten with a sudden sharp wonder as to what they might think, seeing her ride so with their master as he came to take possession of his inheritance. But the passionate urgency of his whisper drove that thought from her, and shook her out of all consideration for the conventionalities which hedged her sex around. It was true what he said ; and why should she deny it ? The voices of the servants were already in her ears ; she felt their eyes watching her ; but she was more conscious still of the eyes of the man by her side, waiting hungrily for her answer.

" Catherine ? "

Then she looked up, her blue eyes again tumultuous with emotion ; and meeting his frankly, she whispered with the simplicity of truth a single word :

" Yes ! "

" Thank God ! " he answered fervently, and the next moment he had dismounted and was greeting an old man who had been elected to give him the welcome of his servants.

" You will come inside ? " he asked her in a low voice. " I must remain a little time."

" No," she whispered back. " Not—not this morning. I will wait here."

He found an implied promise in the words, which consoled him for whatever disappointment he felt ; and as he passed into the house he whistled blithely—a happy man.

For her part, Catherine Passmore, reviewing the last few crowded moments, grew grave and thoughtful. In the rush of emotion, she had forgotten things which she was now remembering. Last night, in the first hour of her cousin's arrival, her uncle—a sick old man—had indeed hinted of the possibility of which Roger Passmore had openly spoken to Sir Harry. And she, fancy free, who had never had a thought of a man in all her life, had not demurred. It had seemed a little thing to follow her uncle's wishes in the matter, and whilst there had been no promise, yet had allowed the assumption to go—tacitly consenting. Last night ! But that was ages ago ! So much had happened in the interval. She had not dreamed then that love would come to her in such a hurrying tide, had not known what such love meant. Even now she quivered at the thought of it, and felt her heart leap.

But was love—even such love as this, whose coming she had not sought, but which had surprised her into swift surrender—justification of ingratitude ? She used the world plainly ; for she owed everything to her uncle, and not least of all she owed him obedience to his wishes. Could she inflict upon him such a blow as a disappointment in the thing he had planned would be ? He was a sick, gentle old man, who had known much sorrow, and now was snatching at joy in his declining days.

Her mouth quivered with distress as she thought of him, and there was a little gush of tears to her eyes as she so thought of him.

“ Oh ! ” she whispered to herself. “ It would be cruel : and yet——”

Voices sounded from the house, coming towards the door. Hastily she flicked the tears from her eyes, with her gloved hand, and turned slightly that for a moment her face might not be seen. Then her lover came outside

with an old servant at his elbow, the latter speaking earnestly.

"As God's my salvation, it is true, Sir Harry! The strange beast was in our barn. I heard it howl—a howl to make you shiver. I daren't go out to it in the dark, but this morning I found the place where it had lain, and part of a sheep eaten, and there are tracks of it in the snow, coming and going, with a man's footsteps alongside."

Catherine heard every word clearly, and they set her wondering. A second later she caught her lover's reply:

"Show me! We must stop this thing. Why——"

He was already moving on towards the gable of the house, obviously much concerned. She hesitated a moment, then as he disappeared round the house with the man-servant, she slipped from her horse, and called the boy who was walking Sir Harry's mount up and down the drive.

"Hold my horse!"

The boy took the reins; and gathering up her riding skirt, she followed her lover quickly. When she reached the rear of the house, she saw him a little distance away, near a building that was obviously a barn, and which was flanked by a stack-yard. She hurried towards him, and before she reached him saw him go down on his knees in the snow to examine something. She reached him before he rose, and saw that he was staring at some paw-tracks in the snow, which she took for those of a dog.

"What is it, Sir Harry?" she asked, a little wonderingly.

Startled, he jumped to his feet. "I did not know you had followed," he said lamely, his face to her discerning eyes full of trouble.

"But what is the matter? Why are you so interested in a dog's tracks in the snow?"

"That's no dog's tracks!" broke out the serving-man. "They're too long an' narrow, Miss Catherine. Besides, I've glimpsed the beast's eyes in the dark. They were like coals."

A suspicion shot into the girl's mind, and she flashed



a silent question with her eyes. Sir Harry nodded in answer, and with a little shiver she turned away whilst he gave instructions to the man.

She waited until they were riding to the gates on their homeward way, then she asked :

“ It was that beast we saw—hunting Roger ? ”

“ Yes. I think so.”

“ And that man of yours was right. It is not a dog.”

“ No, it is not a dog. It is a hunting cheetah—a kind of leopard.”

“ Oh ! ” she cried with a little shiver.

“ I have seen them in use in the Indies, where they are trained to the chase. They are led hooded and chained to within running distance of their quarry, and then unhooded and released as a coursing dog is loosed on a hare. They’re pretty bloodthirsty beasts—but I never dreamed one might be trained to take a man ! That is a black’s idea.”

“ How terrible ! ” she cried quiveringly.

“ I recognized the hooded thing in the moonlight last night—but it seemed to me too incredible to be true.”

“ You think Roger knows ? ”

“ He can’t help but know after this morning,” he said grimly. “ His enemy—the blackamoor who stared in at the window last night——”

“ Ah ! You saw him ? ”

“ We both saw him ! ” he answered, not troubling to hide the truth. “ He must be an implacable brute ! ”

“ And the others ! ” she cried in a troubled voice.

“ There are the others. Oh, my poor uncle. If—if—— But why should these men seek Roger ? ”

“ How should I know ? ” he answered evasively.

“ That is a question for your cousin, my dear ! A man makes enemies as he goes across the world, as he makes friends. And Roger Passmore seems skilled that way. I myself could wring his neck for the trouble he has brought you this morning—for the trouble he may yet bring. God’s curse should light on the man for bringing his troubles to shadow the innocent with care. My dear ! You must make

my dream come true very quickly. You cannot live at Wyke under the shadow, as you must, whilst those men——”

“ But my poor uncle ? ” she whispered brokenly. “ I cannot leave him to——”

He broke in on the words harshly : “ Look, who comes ! ”

And Catherine, looking forward through her tears, saw a horseman ascending the hill to meet them, and on the instant recognized her cousin.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE PAPIST WOMAN

ROGER PASSMORE was in no genial mood as he rode up to the pair coming from the Priory. His dark face wore a frown, his sombre eyes flashed inquiringly as they rested on Catherine, who was visibly embarrassed ; then he explained his presence.

“ I finished my business early,” he said, “ and finding that Catherine had not ridden into the Town, I guessed she had jogged with you all the way to the Priory, Plaxton, so rode this way to join you.” He turned his horse as he spoke, and then added : “ I trust you are satisfied with your inheritance.”

His last words were rude in tone, and Sir Harry in his resentment was inclined to teach him a lesson.

“ Quite ! Though I am a sheep poorer than I was when I rode into Bay Town last night.”

“ A whole sheep ! ” Passmore laughed. “ A thief ? I hope you do not mean to hang the fellow. This is the day of mercy.”

“ It was not a man who killed it—but some strange beast, foreign to this moorside. It was heard, and it left strange footprints in the snow.”

“ So ! ” Not by so much as the movement of an eyelid did the man betray any secret knowledge of what the killing-beast might be. He laughed easily.

“ A wandering and famished dog,” he commented.

" You have been listening to some countryman, a believer in hobgoblins and ghostly hounds, and all things supernatural. When you know these folk as I do, you will give less credence to their tales of mystery."

He saw the girl staring at him with curious gaze, and he laughed again with complete self-possession.

" Sir Harry gives me news of a dead sheep, but I can give you more interesting news."

" Indeed ! " said Catherine, a trifle frostily.

" Yes, about the woman you saw at the window last night, and who left her crucifix in our garden."

Both Plaxton and the girl looked their astonishment, and once more he laughed.

" Intrigues you, hey, cousin ? And you, Plaxton ? It will do so even more when you hear the story."

" Who was she ? " asked Catherine quickly.

" A nun, who——"

" A nun ! " cried the girl in astonishment.

" A nun," he repeated, with evident enjoyment of the girl's surprise, " who came ashore from a Portuguese boat wrecked farther up the coast two days ago. She was travelling to Hull in a private coach, and she halted in the town for an hour or two last night. She talked with Harland the innkeeper, who gossiped about Wyke House, and after a meal she was moved to leave the inn in order to view us by moonlight."

" And to spy through the window ! " the girl interjected.

" Why, yes," he owned. " There's the crumpled rose-leaf. Why should she want to do that—to creep to the house and peep through the panes ? It has an odd look for a nun—being most un-nunlike behaviour. . . . But there's no end to the curiosity of some women, and I'll wager there's an end of one of our mysteries, for she left immediately after her return to the inn, hurriedly, says Harland, which is quite understandable if she feared that Catherine had seen her. . . . All the same, it has an odd look—this nun in a strange place, spending her time in looking through our windows. I would give a guinea to have the correct explanation."

"And I would give a score," cried Catherine quickly. The man laughed carelessly.

"But we shall both save our money, Catherine. The woman must be well on her way to Hull by this—or even possibly arrived at her destination. But there's one of our mysteries solved in a way."

Neither of his hearers offered any further comment, but secretly Sir Harry resolved that some time in the day he would ride down to the cove and hear the story from Harland, since, as set forth by Passmore, it bristled with impossible elements.

For a time they rode on in silence until they reached the stretch of moorland behind the wood, where two of them had seen the third hunted by the cheetah but a short hour before. A man, carrying a gun, was walking along the edge of the wood, and as they approached he was joined by a second who came from the recesses of the wood. One of them saw Passmore, and shouting to him began to run towards him.

"Pardon me, Catherine, I must speak to that man," said Passmore, and left the road for the snow-covered heather.

Sir Harry looked at Catherine and saw that, like himself, she understood the situation. Her cousin unquestionably had set armed men to beat the wood for the beast which had hunted him. The running man halted as he reached the horseman, and a few of his words reached the pair standing in the road.

"We've raked every bush, sir, and whilst there's tracks by the score——"

The rider leaned forward and spoke quickly, no doubt a warning, for the man's voice was so moderated that for the time no further words reached them. But, neither speaking, they continued to watch with interest, and presently the man with the gun raised his voice again, at the same time waving his arm towards the height of the moor.

"Joshua says there's a sprinkle of blood up there. Looks as if you'd hit——"

The rest of the words were lost in a rush of wind, but as it passed other words reached the pair in the road.

“Ten guineas for the beast’s tail——”

Sir Harry turned and spoke to the girl.

“It seems that Roger Passmore is taking measures to rid himself of one enemy.”

“Yes,” said the girl, a little bleakly. “And he is using questionable instruments. That man there is the most disreputable in Bay Town, a smuggler——”

“Oh, they’re all that!” said Sir Harry with a laugh.

“But that one is locally credited with killing a revenue officer, though it has not been proved against him. He is capable of any evil, and my uncle would be shocked at any association between him and Roger.”

Sir Harry offered no comment, but he remembered Passmore’s boast of his old-time power with the men of the Bay and his resolve to resume it, and he thought to himself that here was the beginning of that plan in operation. The man was using that ruffian of the Bay and others of like kidney to hunt down his four-footed enemy; and, heavens! probably its master also. As that reflection came to him he frowned, visioning further trouble for the girl at his side. For the district was wild and lawless; except scattered revenue men, there were no officers of the law, and on such a solitary coast anything was possible with a gang of unscrupulous men at large bent implacably on vengeance on some man living there.

“What is it, Sir Harry?” asked Catherine suddenly, noting the look on his face.

“Nothing!” he answered with a forced laugh. “I was just frowning at your cousin’s delay. Shall we ride on and leave him to overtake us? The wind is very shrewd.”

They rode on, but had gone but a few paces when they heard Passmore behind them, and in a moment he was riding at the girl’s side. His face was a little flushed, but Sir Harry noticed it was free from care, as if his business had gone well, and he offered no explanation of his association with the armed ruffian by the wood, but rode



on humming softly to himself. His spirits apparently grew as they moved on their way. At the head of Bay Town street, a little below the church on the hill-side, they came on a group of children singing an old carol outside a cottage door, and halting his horse, he joined in, his rich bass dominating the singing whilst he beat the time with his riding-switch.

*"The shepherd upon a hill he sat,  
He had on him his tabard and his hat,  
His tar-box, his pipe and his flagat ;  
And his name was called jolly, jolly Wat.  
For he was a good herd's-boy, ut-hoy !  
For in his pipe he made so much joy."*

At the end, he threw the children a handful of silver, and turned to Catherine with laughter on his lips.

"For fifteen years I have not heard the like, Cathy. . . . It is good to be home !"

Then came a set-back for his spirits ; for the door of the cottage, which had been ajar, opened suddenly, and a wrinkled woman glared forth upon him.

"'Tis a strange thing to hear the devil sing carols, Roger Passmore, and an omen of trouble to them what hears."

She looked simply at the girl. "Mind your goings, Miss Catherine ! 'Tis fifteen years this very morning since ye came to the Bay an' fifteen years since that one rode away——"

"Now, what the devil——" began Passmore furiously, and pricked his horse forward, his switch raised to strike. The children scattered, Catherine cried out to the man, and Sir Harry spurred his own horse to intervene ; but the woman saved all trouble by promptly closing the door. Passmore, so cheated, sat his horse, fuming with passion.

"The old harridan ! She deserves flaying ! For a groat I would——"

Then he caught sight of the girl's shocked face, checked himself, laughed harshly and set the spurs to his horse, taking the way to Wyke House. Sir Harry saw in the man's desertion an opportunity.

"Follow him," he said quickly. "I am going to see Harland, and it is better that Roger should not know."

Catherine asked no questions. The thought of the nun who had called at the inn occurred to her, and with a nod of understanding, she rode after Roger Passmore, whilst Sir Harry turned his horse down the steep, snow-covered street.

Arrived at the inn, he gave his horse to a loiterer to hold, and passing inside saw Harland on the threshold of his kitchen. The landlord beamed at the sight of him, and with a Christmas greeting beckoned him forward.

"Ye'll not mind the kitchen, Sir Harry. I've company in the room, come along this morning, a stranger who may be the devil for aught I know of his name, but whose guineas are as good as another's and more plentiful than most men's." He laughed as he thrust a chair towards the fire for his guest, and then rubbed his hands, as he added: "Well, I've had my gentleman here, this morning. Came in as large as life, and called for drinks for all the company as in old days an'——"

"Heard the story of the nun who came here last night," interrupted Sir Harry.

"Ho-ho! he's told ye that?" The landlord laughed, and then chuckled as he went on: "But he couldn't tell ye what he didn't hear."

There was a sly look in the man's eyes, and the significance of his last words was easy to grasp.

"Harland," said Sir Harry crisply, "I want the whole story."

"An' ye shall have it, Sir Harry; for, by the Lord, 'tis strange enough to tell!" He drew up a chair for himself, and plunged straight into his tale. "'Twas main late when the nun came. I'd shut the house for the night when I heard the carriage stop outside—an' going to the door saw it standing there, though the Lord knows how the postboy had got it down the street, in the snow. Then out steps the woman, demanding stabling for the horses an' a meal for herself; and since times are bad an' guests few, I made her welcome here in the kitchen, where

the fire was good, whilst my lass prepared a supper. She was sat where ye sit, toasting her toes, when suddenly she asked : ' What's the name of this village, landlord ? '

" ' Bay Town,' says I carelessly.

" The woman jumped as if I'd let a pistol off in her ear.

" ' Bay Town ! ' she cried, an' stared with eyes that made me shiver.

" ' Why, yes,' says I, puzzled by her manner, ' didn't——'

" ' 'Twas here the *Golden Fortune* was wrecked long ago ? ' she asked sharply.

" ' Yes,' I answered, ' fifteen years ago this very night, an' every poor soul drowned, bar one.'

" ' Bar one ! There was someone saved ? ' she asked, quick as a gun.

" ' Aye,' I told her, ' a little golden-haired maid of three, who drifted ashore alive.'

" ' A little maid of three—golden-haired—did you say golden-haired ? ' she cried, and before I could speak was out of her chair, shaking my arm ; a woman distraught for me to speak and tell quickly what I knew.

" ' Yes ! ' said I quick. ' Golden-haired—with the bluest eyes ye ever saw, a very slip of beauty, as she is to this day.'

" ' She is here ? ' the woman almost screamed.

" ' Up at Squire Passmore's at Wyke House, where she's been since the spar drifted her ashore, his adopted daughter.'

" For a minute the woman didn't speak. She sat there, eyes closed, lips moving but saying nothing, her fingers telling some beads she wore. Then I heard her whisper to herself, ' Dear God, if it should be ! ' A bit later she opened her eyes—eyes so bleak with sorrow that they shook me, an' she asks in a voice that sounded as if she were choking : ' The child had a name ? She was old enough to remember it ? '

" ' Yes ! ' said I. ' The little 'un called herself " Cathy ".'

" ' Oh ! ' said the woman. ' Oh ! ' Just like that, an' I saw her hand pressing her heart, whilst her face

was the colour of white clay or of the face of the dead. The look of it made me shiver, an' thinking she was going altogether, I ran for brandy. She revived when she'd sipped, an' then sudden as could be, she stood up an' rapped out sharp: 'Landlord, where is this Wyke House?'

"'Above the town, a mile away,' said I, wondering what whimsy was in her mind.

"'You will take me there!' she said, and when I began to mention the cold an' the snow, an' the lateness of the hour, she snapped me up. 'Man, I shall pay you well. Take me! What do I care for the snow?'"

"You took her?" asked Sir Harry quickly.

"As far as the gates," replied the landlord. "When she could see the house with the lower windows all lit, she bade me stop there, and await her return." Harland shuffled and gave a shamefaced laugh. "Open confession! I'll be honest an' confess, Sir Harry. . . . I waited a bit and then I crept after her. 'Twas broad moonlight, and I saw her making for the terrace; and I crouched in the bushes to watch. Scarce had I done so, when a strange thing befell. I saw the black form of a man lift himself in front of one of the windows and peer in, and the next moment ran as if the devil were after him; then the lattice opened——"

"Yes! Yes!" broke in Sir Harry. "But the nun? Where was she—not with the man?"

"No! I'd lost track of her for a minute, but after a little while I saw her against the snow and the light from the second window. She was creeping towards that, and you can wager I watched her with all my eyes, wondering what was to follow. She crouched under the window for a second or two, and then lifted herself, as the man had done, to look into the long room. She stood there no longer than the flick of a finger; the next second she had turned an' was running like a greyhound, so that I had to pick myself up and run as I'd never run in my life, to reach the gates before her.

"But I was there when she came, and I saw her face in the moonlight. It made me shudder. The eyes were

burning ; the face was white as chalk, and wore a look of frozen horror, so that I cried out :

“ ‘ My God, madame, you look as if you’d seen a ghost ! ’

“ ‘ A ghost ! I have,’ she gasped, in a shaking voice. ‘ The ghost of Satan ! Run, man ! Run, before he comes to take me ! ’

“ An’, as I hope for salvation, Sir Harry, she tore past me, racing down the hill in front of me, her whimpering, like that of a lost soul, coming to my ears as I followed her.”

## CHAPTER XII

### AN OLD MAN'S WISH

**H**ARLAND paused to kick the fire together, then he resumed quietly :

“ Ye know the street ! How that woman got down it without breaking her neck beats me. Boy an’ man I’ve gone up an’ down it these five-an’-forty years, an’ know every turn an’ hollow in it ; but I wouldn’t take it at the pace that Papist nun did for all the gold in the Riding. I had to slow down, an’ when I got here she was in the kitchen shaking the postboy into wakefulness, an’ bidding him harness up.

“ The poor chap, half asleep, swore that the horses couldn’t do it and that they’d never get the carriage up the hill, and at last fell to swearing. But the woman showed sense. She whipped out her purse and shook from it five golden guineas. ‘ These are for you,’ says she, ‘ if ye’re ready for the road in fifteen minutes.’ At the chink of them the postboy jumped. ‘ We’ll be ready,’ he shouted, ‘ an’ the beasts shall travel or I’ll whip the hearts out of ’em ! ’

“ He fairly ran from the house to the stables, and then the woman turned to me. Her face was like chalk, but her eyes were burning.

“ ‘ Landlord,’ said she, in a voice that told me she’d



not always been a meek nun, 'who is up at that house besides Squire Passmore and the girl?'

" 'Why,' I answered, 'there's two!' And I named yourself, Sir Harry, and Roger Passmore.

" 'What are they like?' she snaps.

" I gave her your description, but before I was through she whispered to herself more than to me: 'Then he is Roger Passmore—and the little one is there in the house of his father! My God!'

" The look on her face shook me. I tried to console her, by telling her the man was but newly come back to the Bay, and that he'd been in exile fifteen years for that sin of his youth. She stared at me as if she didn't grasp my meaning for a minute; then she broke out:

" 'Saints in Heaven! Are you telling me, man, that Roger Passmore was responsible for the wrecking of the *Golden Fortune*?'

" 'That's the story,' said I, wishing I'd held my tongue, and she cried out again:

" ' 'Tis Destiny! Nothing else! But, Mother of God! if he knew!' Then a fit of terror fell upon her. 'Maybe he saw me. If he did—— Landlord, go to the door, and watch the street. If he has followed me——'

" I had to go. There was nothing else for it. The woman was shaking with terror, and would have had a fit, if I hadn't obeyed. So I kicked my toes in the snow till the postboy came with the carriage, and then I went in to tell her. . . . As I'm a living man, she was on her knees crying, poor thing, as if her heart had broken. Her head was buried in the cushions of the chair, and I had to put my hand on her shoulder before she knew I was there. Then she stood up——"

The innkeeper broke off and shivered. "The eyes of her, Sir Harry! They'll haunt me to my dying day; they were the eyes of a lost soul—damned beyond all hope of salvation! She never spoke a word more. She put three guineas on the table there, and went out to the carriage. I went too, for I knew the job the postboy would have to get the horses up the street, and guessed he'd need help.

"It took us most of twenty minutes to get the carriage to the top of the bank, me now at the horses' heads an' now at the shoe ; an' all the time that Papist woman sat in the corner of the carriage an' never moved, her eyes staring in front of her, seeing terrible things, I'll swear. Not until we reached the level did she budge, and then for a minute she put her head out of the window an' stared at the lights of Wyke which showed brightly among the trees on the hill. Then the postboy laid his whip on the jaded horses and the carriage rolled off in the snow making for the Scarborough Road——"

The innkeeper fell silent for a moment, then he added quietly : "That's the whole story, Sir Harry, that I didn't tell to Roger Passmore when he came here this morning inquiring about the carriage which had come here last night, and of which he'd heard from a crony. What d'ye make of it, sir ? 'Tis a strange tale."

Sir Harry, with a glance at the wag-at-the-wall clock, rose abruptly from his seat. He had no wish to tell the innkeeper what he thought of the story, but he felt it incumbent to give a warning.

"It is so strange a tale, Harland, that it must be kept secret. Squire Passmore is your landlord, isn't he ? Yes ! Then this is no story to go abroad if you value your tenancy. Roger Passmore is the heir, and—— Well ! a word to the wise, you know."

"Oh, I know well enough, Sir Harry. But for you I shall be secret as the grave ; but I'd near give my head to know when that nun met Roger Passmore, an' what Miss Catherine is to her. For it was surely to glimpse the maid that woman went to Wyke House ; an' it was the sight of him that sent her racing helter-skelter. 'The Ghost of Satan,' she called him, an' by Heaven ! she feared him as she might have feared Satan's black self."

"With reason, I've no doubt," answered Sir Harry, and was in the act of drawing on his gauntlets, when there came a terrific rapping on the oaken panels of the next room.

Harland grinned.

“That’s my guest in the parlour—a terribly impatient gentleman, but one with guineas to spend. Ye’ll excuse me, Sir Harry——”

“Off you run, Harland. I am going myself. Jupiter ! The man will smash your oak to firewood if——”

Harland ran from the room, and Sir Harry, passing down the passage made his way to the street. The loiterer who held his horse had halted it in front of the inn-window, and for one brief moment as he mounted he glimpsed the innkeeper in obsequious attitude before the guest who had guineas to spend. His eyes sought the latter, and he saw a man of strange pallor and austere countenance, with burning eyes ; whose cravat was of lace, and whose coat, though of sombre hue, was of rich material. He permitted himself a passing wonder as to who the stranger might be, and what such a man as he was doing in Bay Town, a solitary guest in a third-rate tavern on Christmas Day ? But as he set his horse to the steep bank, he promptly forgot him in consideration of Harland’s intriguing story.

The innkeeper, as he recognized, had cut right to the heart of the matter, in his conviction that the nun had gone to Wyke House to see Catherine, and had fled precipitately in an extremity of fear on beholding Roger Passmore.

But why should she have wished to see Catherine, and what possible connection could be between a holy nun and such a man of evil as Passmore ? More than one feasible explanation occurred to him as he rode on, lost in thought, but each in turn he dismissed. Roger Passmore himself, in his account of the nun, had said that here was one of the mysteries explained ; but as he considered the matter, it seemed to him that the mystery of the watching woman had deepened infinitely. Some things, however, stood out startlingly clear. The nun had known of the wreck of the *Golden Fortune*, which had instantly leaped to her mind on hearing she was in Bay Town. But she had not known of any survivor of the wreck till Harland had told her of the child who had

drifted ashore, whom she had apparently recognized by description and name alike, and had been so moved by the knowledge that had come to her that she had started for Wyke House through the bitter cold in the hope of seeing Catherine. There she had seen Roger Passmore, had unquestionably recognized him, though not by name, and had suffered a shock of fear so intense at the sight of him that she had fled incontinently all the way to the inn, and had run from Bay Town itself as fast as her jaded horses could take her.

But these things were the mystery itself and not its elucidation. Her interest in Catherine, her fear of Roger Passmore, her connection with both, were unexplainable things, and the possible meaning of them still eluded him as he rode through the gates of Wyke House.

Still absorbed in the mystery, after leaving the stables he entered the house, and unexpectedly found Catherine alone. She rose from her seat by the fire as he entered. A soft flush came to her face, and again her eyes revealed tumultuous emotion. Momentarily he forgot everything else at the sight of her standing so, and moving straight to her, he caught her hands.

“My dear!” he whispered. “My dear!”

He lifted the hands to his lips and was in the very act of kissing them when the girl snatched them away. Surprised and hurt, he looked up, and saw that her eyes, troubled and apprehensive, were on something beyond the doorway. He glanced swiftly in the direction of their gaze and then understood. Roger Passmore was standing in the hall watching them, his eyes blazing, and a look of concentrated fury on his dark face. That the man had seen his lover-like act was clear, and with the suspicion that he had deliberately spied upon them burning his brain, Sir Harry's own eyes kindled with sharp anger.

Passmore stepped swiftly forward to the doorway, and almost involuntarily Catherine made a little scared movement towards Sir Harry.

“So——” began the man, in a voice that for all its deadly quietness was shaking with passion.

The girl gave a little whispering cry :

" Oh ! Oh ! " Then, before Passmore could continue, or any one of them move, there came a sound of shuffling steps upon the stairs, and the tones of a weak voice crying :

" Roger ! Roger ! Your arm, my son."

The fury went from Passmore's face as if wiped out by an invisible sponge. He turned instantly, and as he moved out of sight, Catherine whispered tremulously :

" My uncle—thank God ! "

Her lover said nothing, but stood there by her side, awaiting the advent of the host whom he had not yet seen. Anger was still the uppermost emotion within him, but a few seconds later it died away in a surge of sheer pity, as his eyes fell on Squire Passmore leaning on his son's arm. He was, as Sir Harry saw at once, a very sick man, aged as he guessed by care and secret sorrow rather than by years, withered of face and feeble of limb. As the pair reached the doorway, the sick man's eyes met his own and then passed to Catherine standing by his side, and for one moment his guest thought they flashed with a troubled questioning light, as if he divined that which he could not possibly have known. A second later as Sir Harry, leaving the girl's side, stepped forward, the questioning light died away, and on the withered face broke a thin smile of welcome.

" Sir Harry, I am happy to welcome you to my house to-day. Your uncle and I were great friends."

" The happiness is mine, sir. But for you I should have been a solitary man this Christmas Day."

The old man smiling shook his head, and glanced at Catherine, still standing by the fire.

" The debt is mine ! I cannot forget how you helped my niece last night. . . . A dastardly outrage that ! I have never known the like in all the years I have lived on the Bay. We have our smugglers and poachers—but no footpads. I cannot think who the men can be. There was a gang, I understand ? "

" A gang, sir. A ruffianly crew."



"We must send word to the authorities, and have them hunted out of the neighbourhood."

"Don't worry about that, father," broke in Roger Passmore. "There is no need that you who are unwell should excite yourself. I expect they were just a company of mariners tramping from one port to another. In any case, there are others who can deal with them. May I assist you to your chair, sir? It is not good that you should stand here in the draughts."

There was a note of filial solicitude in the last words, and Sir Harry saw the old man look up into his son's face with a flash of gratitude in his faded eyes.

"You are very thoughtful for your old father, Roger. It is good to have you home again."

Roger Passmore gave a cheerful laugh.

"Believe me, sir, I find it good to be home with you—and Catherine."

Sir Harry found in the last words a subtle stab at both himself and the girl, and the sudden pallor of the girl's face told him that she so understood it, also. But no reply was possible, and he watched the son conduct the father to his chair, wondering how far the solicitude he showed was genuine and how far simulated. In any case, genuine or false, it was certainly unsparing of pains, for when the old man was seated, the son hurried for a foot-rest, fussed with a cushion, and then stood with one hand on the back of the chair, looking down with filial anxiety.

"Comfortable, sir?"

"Quite, thank you, my son."

There was a tender look in the tired eyes as they lifted themselves to the dark face bending over them, and for a moment they were dimmed with tears. Then the Squire smiled, and stretching a hand squeezed the other's arm affectionately. His obvious affection for his son was touching to witness, and Sir Harry found it convincing evidence of the complete reconciliation between the pair. But again anger stirred within him as he thought of the situation developing, and what it would mean to the old

Squire should he by any chance learn the truth about the smiling villain by his side. Then came a sudden diversion. Mr. Passmore's eyes, wandering round the room, alighted on the damaged window which had been stuffed with cloth to keep out the draught.

"A broken pane!" he said. "How came that?"

For a moment there was silence, and if the Squire had chanced to look at his niece's face suspicions must have quickened within him. But his eyes were for the window, and a second later his son answered easily:

"An accident, sir. I slipped on the oak and thrust my hand through the glass." He held the bandaged hand forward. "You remember, I explained?"

"Yes! Yes! Of course. My memory fails me. It was fortunate you were not seriously hurt, my son. . . . I remember—Catherine bound it for you, Roger." He smiled musingly, and then apparently forgetting the girl's presence, he said: "She is a treasure, Roger. As I said, you might do worse, much worse, and you cannot do better."

Roger Passmore's dark eyes swept the room, mocked Sir Harry silently, and for an instant rested smilingly on the girl's flushed face.

"I am entirely of that mind, sir. As I explained last night, your wishes are my own."

The old man smiled, well pleased.

"Catherine will make no difficulty. She will follow my wishes, and——"

"Uncle!" the girl broke in hurriedly. "You forget we are not alone."

"No, I do not forget. I am not so remiss, my dear, but Sir Harry is our friend, almost our only neighbour, and there is no reason that he should not have our confidence."

For one moment the faded eyes were lifted to his guest, the ghost of a smile in them. But there was something else there also, something a little enigmatic, which, however, Sir Harry interpreted by the questioning gleam that he had observed in them when they had alighted on Catherine and himself standing side by side. The old

Squire *had* guessed something. He was acting deliberately in discussing matters in this open, embarrassing fashion, warning him in a covert way that Catherine was not for him. Roger Passmore's eyes, glinting with triumph, were evidence that he also took the old man's meaning, and in the indignation that look stirred within him he could have struck the man. But he gave no sign of understanding anything beyond what was on the face of the words, and the Squire's next remarks drove that glinting triumph from his son's eyes with amazing swiftness.

"For eight years, Roger—ever since the rumour of your death—Catherine has been my heiress. By my will she was to have everything. Last night when you came home so unexpectedly, I thought to myself I must send for the lawyer and give you your proper portion, but this morning I have decided I shall not trouble. There is no need. When you are married, what is hers will become yours—a simpler way, don't you think?"

Had a barrel of powder been exploded under them, his listeners could scarcely have been more startled. For a second all three faces betrayed absolute consternation; then Roger Passmore's grew swiftly mask-like. Only his eyes betrayed anything of the anger he felt at the unusual proposition.

"Quite so, sir," he replied suavely.

"Oh, but, uncle——" began Catherine protestingly, and in acute distress; and then stopped, uncertain how to proceed.

The old man gave a feeble, doting laugh.

"My dear, if Roger does not mind, why should you?"

"But, sir," cried Sir Harry, perceiving the difficulty in which Catherine was thrown, "you are doing your son something less than justice!"

"How?" asked the old man, a little tartly.

"Well, if you let that will stand, and Miss Catherine should look elsewhere for a husband, then your son——"

"Catherine will not 'look elsewhere,' as you phrase it, Sir Harry. She knows my desires—and her duty, and she will do what I wish."

Sir Harry dared not look at the girl. She had seen the abyss opening at her feet, and now must know that it was yawning wide. But he glanced at Roger Passmore and found him smiling broadly, and in the same second the man said smoothly :

" I have no fear, sir, that Catherine will do anything against your wishes. She owes you so much."

The last was true enough, as Sir Harry was forced to own, but in his mind there was a set-off to the debt, of which the girl knew nothing. But she should not remain in ignorance. Before she should be made the victim of her own sense of gratitude to this doting old man, he would tell her the whole story of her own coming to Bay Town. He vowed that silently to himself as he stood there, indignant that she should be pressed into a way along which, thank God, her heart did not take her. But for the moment he was silent, contenting himself with flashing a message of courage as he met her eyes, troubled and pitiful, and he was relieved when she found an excuse to leave the room.

" My spectacles, Roger," said the old Squire. " I have forgotten——"

" Certainly, sir."

Roger Passmore hurried away, and Sir Harry deliberately crossed to the window and looked forth in the direction of the Peak.

" We have a fine prospect, Sir Harry," said the Squire affably.

" Very," was the answer duly given. " That is the Old Peak across there, is it not ?"

" Yes."

There was a hint of trouble in the old man's voice, but Sir Harry, fighting for a girl whose gratitude to the Squire would not let her fight for herself, was adamant.

" 'Twas there the *Golden Fortune* was wrecked, was it not ?"

For an appreciable time there was a tense silence in the room. Sir Harry did not look round, but instead watched the grey waters break to foam at the base of the Peak.

He knew that he was dealing harshly with an old man, and as the silence continued his conscience pricked him ; but in his mind's eye was the vision of a girl's white face with blue eyes full of troubled dismay, and he would not let either conscience or pity stay his hand. Then on the silence broke Squire Passmore's quavering voice :

" Ah ! You are acquainted with that story ? "

" With the whole of it. I am wondering if Catherine knows it."

" God forbid ! " said the old man quickly. " I have been at pains to keep it secret from her ! "

" And your son ? Is he aware that she is the sole survivor of——"

" He knows nothing," said the Squire harshly. " It is better for my plan that he remains in ignorance."

" But is that fair to Catherine ? If your wishes are followed and the truth becomes known——"

" You are very anxious for my niece," broke in the old man, a trifle querulously.

Sir Harry ceased all pretence of considering the view. He turned deliberately to face the Squire.

" Why, yes, sir," he said. " That is true. And my interest is so deep that for your son's sake I would you altered your will—if you would not leave him without a groat."

The Squire was pricked rather than daunted by this open declaration. He laughed thinly.

" You are considerate for my son, Sir Harry ! And you have known my niece less than twenty-four hours."

" An hour more than your son, sir ! "

Roger Passmore came whistling down the stairs, and into the room with the spectacles, and the conversation ended abruptly ; but as surely as if he had been ordered forth, Sir Harry knew that he was no longer a welcome guest at Wyke House, though the old man, with the cunning of a skilled player, avoided the *faux pas* of letting him depart, when after dinner he proposed to go.



## CHAPTER XIII

## A BLOW

THE long day was ended. Catherine had retired to rest ; the Squire had long been gone, and Sir Harry, with a glass of wine at his elbow, stared into the fire, conscious that Passmore, who had indulged freely, was watching him with sombre eyes.

The curtains were drawn ; outside the night was very still, and the only sound was the faint rumble of the sea. The stillness became oppressive, and was broken by the noisy crackle of a log in the fire ; then Passmore laughed softly.

"So," he said, "the Fates have cast us for the parts of rivals."

Sir Harry glanced sharply at him, marked a little flame in the sombre eyes, and, without answering, gave the fire his attention anew. The other laughed again, a little sneeringly.

"But you, my dear Plaxton, will have the harsher part to play. I am afraid you will be left out in the cold."

"You think so ?" asked Sir Harry in a hard voice.

"My dear fellow, I know it. My father's influence and will are paramount with my cousin. She will come to me like a little ewe lamb."

There was that in his tones—a slighting note as he referred to Catherine—which stirred a swift anger in Plaxton's heart ; but he kept the rein upon it, answering with a touch of contempt.

"Your father's influence and will ! Do you then depend on them to secure what you cannot win for yourself ?"

"*Touché !*" Passmore laughed, a little tipsily. "You are ready of tongue. But you are mistaken. The Squire's influence will count, but I back myself to win on my merits."

"Merits ! You claim them ?" Sir Harry yawned, and across the fireplace considered the other a little contemptuously. Then he added : "You are wagering in

the dark. I could give you a reason why you will never wed Catherine."

"You are confident, my friend. I should like to know your ground for——"

"Oh!" broke in Sir Harry, "it can be seen from the window. If you will step this way, I shall have pleasure in showing you."

He left his chair as he spoke and himself crossed to the window. The other watched him curiously as he drew aside the curtain and stared across the moonlit sea; then he lurched to his feet and moved to where Sir Harry stood. The latter pointed.

"There under the Peak where the sea breaks whitely on the rocks. Fifteen years ago the *Golden Fortune* struck there——"

"Damn you!" hissed Passmore sharply. "You will never tell her?"

"Wait! The manner of the wrecking of that tall ship would be sufficient if it were told—but there is something you do not know, which when you have heard it——"

"Out with it, man!"

His tone, though contemptuously brusque, lacked confidence; and as he stood there the gold rings in his ears gleaming and his eyes burning, he gnawed his moustache, nervously.

"There is a gulf between you and Catherine that is just as deep as the sea out there. You call her cousin; have you inquired how she came to Wyke House?"

"Lord, man, what matter? I do not get your drift."

"She came by the *Golden Fortune*—a little child out of two hundred souls who——"

Passmore was taken utterly aback. He stood there like a figure carved from stone. Then he broke out whisperingly:

"My God! No!"

"Yes," said Sir Harry remorselessly.

For a moment there was no sound save the distant rumble of the sea; then suddenly Roger Passmore laughed aloud, and clutched at a straw.

"But she does not know! Cathy does not know!"

"No! But should you persist——"

"Ah! Curse you for a hound! You would tell her? You threaten me. But by G—— you never shall! I will cut your tongue out first."

There was passion in his voice; his brows were furrowed with anger, his eyes were flaming; he was within an ace of losing all control. Sir Harry knew it, and himself quivering with passion, deliberately heaped fuel on the fire he had kindled.

"I shall tell her more, if you do not withdraw your pretensions. She shall not be for gratitude a little ewe lamb—you said—a little ewe lamb for such a slaughterer. There is that broken pane. I shall tell her the meaning of that——"

"Perdition! Before that——"

The man's arm swung back sharply, and Sir Harry received a smart blow in the mouth. His face went white as the snow outside. His eyes glowed with wrath that was no longer hot but cold.

"A blow!" he cried softly. "I would not take that from God."

Passmore laughed ferociously. "But you have taken it from me."

"To give you back at the sword-point," whispered Sir Harry hoarsely, and began to clear the chairs away.

"Outside!" said Passmore sharply. "My cousin sleeps above—also my father. Here we shall be disturbed. At the end of the terrace we shall be free from intrusion. With the snow and the moonlight, the night is like day. Let us go. There are weapons in the hall."

He led the way and pointed to a rack of swords upon the wall.

"Help yourself and choose well. Remember you are about to die."

With the naked blades in their hands they crept from the house like guilty men, until they reached a broad place at the end of the terrace, where the moon shone unhindered. There Passmore turned, and as he did so

the other caught the gleam of the moonlight on the golden rings in his ears, and caught too the fiercer gleam in his dark eyes. Then the man spoke.

"It is a pity that you are my father's guest. To kill you seems an excess of hospitality. But you give me no option, unless—unless you will give me your promise to keep secret the things you know."

Sir Harry gave a laugh of derision.

"You do not understand, Plaxton. I have fought many times for my life. I shall most certainly kill you. But make your promise——"

"On guard!" laughed Sir Harry, "or I shall think you grow afraid."

"So—your blood be on your own head."

They saluted punctiliously like men who faced each other for the mimic battle of the fencing-room, then the swords rang together, and instantly Passmore began to crowd upon the other, pressing him hard, seeking, as it were, to end the engagement in a single bout. But Sir Harry was wary. He also had fought for his life in the heat of battle, when the niceties of the fencing-schools were forgotten, and when only a man's wits and broad skill could save him, and recognizing the other's tactics he set himself steadfastly to hold him off until he should tire.

The blades rang and parted, rasped and hissed, gleaming like flashes of light under the moon. Passmore raging, and hungry for the other's life, lunged ferociously, his eyes burning, a ferocious snarl on his lips. But whilst Plaxton was forced to give ground, never once did he fail to guard, and not once did the other's point, leaping like a snake's venomous tongue, get within half a foot of him. Cool, alert, strong of wrist, he stalled the other's rushes, turned aside his long lunges, or leaped back when the point came too near, displaying an agility that the other found wearying.

"Curse you," grunted Passmore, breathing heavily, "stand your ground, and don't hop like a sparrow."

Sir Harry laughed softly at the words, mocking the passion in the other's voice; but as he fought to wear the

other down, waiting patiently till his own moment to attack should come, the voice of reason began to assert itself. If he killed this man, what would follow? If he failed to stall one of these fierce rushes and fell, what would happen to Catherine? In the one case he would be an exile from Wyke House for ever: in the other the girl must inevitably yield to the pressure of the doting old Squire and this black rascal, who fought so furiously and who was capable of ferocious things. Calmly he considered the matter whilst he parried two lightning lunges which followed in quick succession. Short of throwing away his weapon and pleading like a craven, he could see no way out of the coil save fighting it to the finish and——

His thought broke off. He almost shouted in sheer astonishment, and only a leap backward saved his life. Then as the other came on, he gave a hoarse, warning whisper:

“Steady, Passmore! We have an audience!”

He parried a lunge, and as the blades rasped he spoke again:

“Don’t—look round. There are men behind you——”  
The encountering blades hissed and whined, as he added:  
“Three at least—watching——”

“So?”

“In the bushes—to the left,” he added, as he himself straightened his elbow, making a straight line from shoulder to sword-point and stepped sharply forward.

It was a lunge for which the other was unprepared, and it ripped his silken vest as it might have ripped his heart had Sir Harry chosen. The other staggered rather than jumped backward, and his opponent whispered again:

“Your friends—I think. I shall not kill you—to-night. Run your blade against mine. So! Feint! but give ground all—the time—I shall drive you—towards the door.”

“Right, my cock—I see two others to the right. We’re in for it, if——”

Sir Harry, like a man tiring of defence and assured that



his moment had come, developed a fury of attack that must have been amazing to those watchers in the shadows. It had an air of reality that must have deceived them utterly ; and though not once did he try to use the advantage which was most certainly his now, Passmore's face revealed a very real fear. Steadily he was driven back, until he was almost at the steps.

"They—are following——" he gasped. "I saw one slip across—just now."

"Right. The door is ajar. Break for it—after the next lunge. I'll follow."

Sir Harry's thoughts were now entirely on the watchers behind. If they suspected the ruse, they might rush the pair of them before they could slip indoors. Then—

"Get ready !" he whispered. "Now !"

He lunged violently, carelessly, to deceive the men behind, and with the stroke delivered, made no attempt to guard. The other's face was full in the moonlight, and suddenly it wrinkled in a triumphant snarl. Like lightning he lunged straight for the heart of the man who had fought to save him. But the snarl had been a warning of treachery. Swift as thought, Sir Harry dropped on one knee, and was up again, driving the hilt of his weapon in Passmore's throat, before he could recover from that murderous but abortive thrust. Under the blow, the man went down like a log, his head striking the steps as he fell. And with the sound of hurrying feet in his ears, Sir Harry leaped, kicked open the door, and with a super-human effort in a single action, jerked the fallen man inside ; then shot the bolts, to the sound of low-voiced growls and curses from without.

## CHAPTER XIV

## THE ATTACK ON THE HOUSE

FOR a full minute after he had shot the bolts of the door, Sir Harry stood quite still, two things dividing his attention—the sound of cautious steps outside, and the unconscious man lying at his feet. His ears registered the movements outside, and his eyes stared frowningly down at the man with whom he had fought what had become at last a mimic battle, and who with his own safety from the watchers' designs assured had attempted that murderous lunge.

The reasons that had inspired the treacherous attempt were as clear to him as an open book. Passmore, desiring to be rid of one who was not only his rival in love but had knowledge that would prove his undoing, had taken the chance offered, no doubt with the thought that the death of one who was his father's guest could be attributed to those men outside. He would have pitched some fine tale of an attack in which he and his guest had stood shoulder to shoulder, and in which the guest had fallen victim. So he would have been rid of one who was to him an embarrassment and at the same time have remained immune from blame.

"A pretty scheme!" he muttered, as he looked down at the dark face. "And a d——d dirty one!"

The sound of feet crunching the frozen snow outside made an insistent claim on his undivided attention, and lifting his eyes from his unconscious enemy, he stared at the door. Would those men without attempt an entrance?

The footsteps approached the door, and he glanced quickly at the bars to make sure that in his haste he had driven them home. They were well in their sockets, and reassured on that point he waited, breathlessly, for what was to follow. Would there be a summons or an open assault on the house?

A hand groped on the door, then the great iron latch within lifted slowly and with but the faintest click. The

soft thud of knee against the wood exerting pressure followed, then the latch was softly lowered, and there followed the sound of retreating steps. He waited until the sound died away, and then he looked round. If those men outside meant to attack the house, the position, as he recognized, was pretty desperate ; but in any case their assault would not be made upon that massive door, and there was no sense in lingering in the hall. Leaving Passmore lying in the hall, he hurried into the room where they had been when the quarrel had broken out. The curtains were drawn, preventing any view either way, and after a moment's thought he set to work to extinguish all the candles, leaving the room in darkness save for the red glow of the fire.

Then he crept to one of the windows and listened. For a time he heard nothing whatever, and he began to think that the men outside had either withdrawn or were trying to effect an entrance at the rear of the house. The latter possibility troubled him little. The door, as stout as the one in front, would resist anything but fire or a battering-ram, and the windows, as he had chanced to observe in the afternoon, were small and barred with iron, and it would be impossible for the house to be forced that way without giving warning by the noise that must be made.

The weak places were the two great windows in that room, both their lattices held in place by simple catches. A pane cut from the leadwork with a knife, a hand deftly inserted, and the catch drawn back, and the way into the house was open—for one man at a time ! He chuckled to himself as the last thought occurred to him, and sword in hand crouched by the window, listening, listening, for what seemed an unconscionable time.

A faint sound in the hall momentarily divided his attention. Passmore was probably beginning to revive, he thought to himself. Well, let the dog ! It was perhaps as well that the stunning blow had not broken his neck, and there was consolation in the reflection that the treacherous hound would have a sore throat for a month. It would be a lesson——

" Ah ! At last ! " he whispered, as once more he caught the crunching of feet in the snow.

The steps came nearer, and he guessed that there were at least three or four men approaching. A moment later his anticipations were confirmed, for the steps ceased outside the window where he crouched, and almost immediately after he heard a hoarse voice speak in a chuckling whisper :

" Satan ! Here's luck ! There's a handy pane stuffed with cloth."

Sir Harry stood up, and silently stepped back a pace, carefully measuring his distance from the broken pane, of the position of which he had an exact remembrance. Then he stood waiting, listening again.

" Out with it ! " said another voice, and there followed slight sounds which told him that the cloth which had been used to shut out the draught was being dragged out on the farther side.

There was sufficient light from the fire to show him the movements of the curtain when the hand should be inserted, and he waited tensely for the moment to strike.

" Curse it ! The glass has an edge ! " came a voice.

" Snip it out ! " advised a second voice, and there followed sounds which told him that the advice was being acted upon.

Then the curtain bulged sharply as a hand was thrust in through the leadwork. He watched the bulge as it travelled along the curtain towards the catch ; then, when he judged the moment was ripe, he pointed carefully with the sword—once, like a man making sure of his target—then lunged with all his might at the point where the arm came through the broken pane.

A perfectly ferocious yell followed the thrust. The arm was jerked backward so swiftly that the sword was drawn from Sir Harry's grasp and fell with a clatter to the oak. A second later, as he stooped to recover it, there reached him the sound of feet hurriedly retreating.

Was it a feint, or were the men outside really withdrawing ? The latter seemed too utterly improbable to

be entertained, but in the time of respite it would be as well to prepare for any attack that might be made. He would get pistols and ammunition ; but first he decided to make sure that the men had really left the terrace, since should only one man win into the house he could make the way easy for his fellows. Cautiously, he pulled aside the curtain and looked forth. So far as he could see from that point the moonlit terrace was empty. He hurried to the other window and again looked forth. There was no one visible.

Whilst he stared forth a sound reached him from behind, and as he swung round, he saw Roger Passmore standing, one hand against the door-post, a desperately sick look upon his face, which was lit by a light that was approaching from the stairs. The man tried to speak to him, and achieved nothing more than a croak. The light grew more pronounced, and since it might prove dangerous should the men outside be tempted to try a shot, he hurried to the door, his drawn and bloodied sword in his hand. He had little doubt as to who bore the light, and a second later as he brushed past Passmore his thought was confirmed, for coming from the stairs with the lighted candle in her hand showing the apprehension on her face, was Catherine.

At the sight of the weapon in his hand, she halted sharply, and as she looked from one to the other, the trouble in her face grew.

" Oh ! " she cried in a low, tense voice. " There has been a quarrel. You—you——"

" A quarrel ! " Sir Harry flashed a warning glance at Roger Passmore, and forced a laugh. " Well, I suppose it might bear that name. I have just run a man through the arm who was trying to open the window there through the broken pane. No doubt his yell awakened you ? "

He saw the worst trouble die from her face, and there was a note of unconcealed relief in her voice as she answered him.

" Yes. I heard it. The servants also. They——"

A twittering of frightened feminine voices overhead



caused him to look up, and on the gallery, with a single candle lighting their white, scared faces, he saw the maids bunched together. Then he looked back at her. She was staring concernedly at Roger Passmore, whose hand was at his throat, whilst his sick face was twisted with pain.

"Roger! You are hurt?" she cried.

The man tried to speak, gulped with an effort, and managed a word or two.

"It is—nothing!"

"A blow in the throat," said Sir Harry, coming to his assistance, and at the same time gave the man a thrust to remind him of his foul treachery. "He was lucky it was not a sword-thrust. You see those men outside——"

"Men?" broke in the girl. "Then there is more than one man?"

"Several! Half a dozen, I should say at a guess—a ruffianly lot."

The girl looked at him sharply.

"Those men who attacked my carriage last night?"

"It seems likely," he owned, "unless some of your local free-traders are taking to house-robbing in place of smuggling."

"You know it must be them," asserted the girl. "But what can they want with us?"

"They did not shout their intentions through the window," he said with a laugh, "or I might have told you!" Then, lest he should be questioned further, he continued quickly: "We do no good talking here. Those men may return and it is well to be prepared. I was just about to get my pistols from my room when you appeared. I wonder if you could find them?"

"Certainly!" said Catherine quickly. "And I will get you my uncle's also."

"Good!" He turned to Passmore. "Perhaps you will get yours. They may be needed."

Roger Passmore made no reply, but stumbled towards the stairs, and as he passed Catherine the girl looked at her lover again.

"You were outside?" she said curiously. "When those men came you were outside. You must have been, or how did Roger come by that blow in the throat?"

"Yes," he answered as casually as he could, wondering if her quick mind were on the track of the truth, "we were outside. You see, it is a beautiful night, and the room there is over-hot."

"And those men struck——"

"The pistols—my dear," he reminded her whisperingly.

"Yes——"

"And keep out of range of the windows. If they see a light, those men outside may have a fancy to try a shot."

"I will be careful," she said, and moved towards the stairs.

Sir Harry himself returned to the room, and going to the window stood in the shadow of the curtain to listen. He thought he heard a whistle blown—a bo'sun's pipe—but was not sure, and in any case it came from some distance away. Then cautiously he drew the curtain aside, and looked forth. The moonlight, frostily clear, showed him all the snow-covered garden in front, but so far as he could perceive there was no one about. To be sure, a score of men might be lurking in the shrubbery where the bushes on one side were in deep shadow, and it was well to take no risks by openly displaying himself. He remained there in the darkness, listening, watching through the slight opening he had made, until Catherine returned, bearing his own pistols, and a brace belonging to the Squire, the latter mounted with silver handsomely chased. She set them down upon the table with a powder-horn and a little bag of bullets that she had brought with her, and as she did so, Roger Passmore entered the room with a pistol in either hand. His face, as the girl's solitary candle revealed, had still the pained sick look, but he had recovered somewhat, and managed to speak in a croaking voice:

"I will guard this window, hey?"

"Which you like," answered Sir Harry, without looking at him.

"And I will stay to load the pistols in case of need," said the girl.

"No!" Sir Harry's tone was almost peremptory. "You can do better than that. If you can watch from a room overhead unseen, you may be able to warn us of their coming should they attack again."

At the moment he did not want her there to question and probe for the truth. He suspected that already she had an inkling of something beyond what he had told her—and indeed Passmore's morose and hang-dog air was sufficient to set reflecting a much duller mind than hers—and wanted time to think, to marshal the facts and if possible make the truth safe from her sharp eyes. He found it a tremendous relief when she accepted his decision.

"Shall I leave the candle?" she asked.

"Thank you, no! Light one of those in the sconce above the mantelpiece. That will serve us."

Catherine did so, and moved towards the door, and as she passed out spoke over her shoulder:

"I will bid the maids watch also."

The two men heard her ascend the stair, caught the sound of her voice giving low-toned directions to the servants, and heard her pass into the room overhead. They turned to each other and their eyes met. In Sir Harry's there was a flicker of contempt, but those of Passmore had a sombre flame of hate in them. For a second there was silence between them, then Passmore spoke hoarsely, painfully.

"Then Catherine is not to know of that affair on the terrace?"

"No! Not unless you tell her," replied Sir Harry tartly.

"But some day we shall resume that—fight it out."

"No!" was the reply emphatically given.

"You will take the blow?" sneered the other, still in his painful croak.

"I have returned it as surely you must know," was the light reply. "And I am—er—particular with whom I fight. When I know that a man will cheat——"

"Perdition!" cried Passmore hoarsely; but Sir Harry lifted a hand simply.

"Listen! Catherine returns. She must have news."

Both men turned swiftly to the door as they caught the sound of light feet running down the stair. A moment later the girl burst in.

"Sir Harry!" she cried, "there is a horseman coming up from the gates!"

## CHAPTER XV

### AT "THE FLASK"

"A HORSEMAN, riding openly, at this hour!" There was a sharp, anxious note in his voice as he cried the words. Then he gave a quick nod of his head, and said more to himself than to the others: "That will be it."

"What?" asked the girl hurriedly.

"Just now I heard a bo'sun's pipe. Doubtless a signal to someone—that rider in the drive as like as not. Maybe he is the leader of those rascals."

"In that case——"

She broke off, but the inquiring look in her eyes finished the question.

"Yes," he said. "Those men may come on again. I think it will be as well if you resumed your watch, Catherine. You can keep us informed of things we cannot see from behind the curtains here. If you see anything of those others, let me know. If the rider is an honest man, he will come straight to the door—though what honest man can be abroad at this hour of a Christmas night, I cannot think."

"I can think of none who might be coming here," said Catherine, and left the room to take up her lookout overhead.

The two men remained each at a window. Neither

of them spoke, and when once or twice Sir Harry spared a glance for the other, he saw him, pistol in hand, peering out into the moonlit night, still as a bronze image. He himself watched the section of the drive visible from his own point of view, but saw nothing of the rider, and concluded that he must already be well beyond that and nearer the house. Then out of the still night came the muffled thud of hoofs on the snow-covered ground which was frozen hard, and suddenly Roger Passmore said hoarsely :

"The rider is coming straight for the house !"

There seemed no doubt of that. The beat of hoofs was plainly audible, and a moment later they rang clear as the horse reached the terrace. Then Catherine appeared at the doorway.

"The horseman is here. There is no sign of any others."

Sir Harry nodded, and both heard and saw the man pass the window at which he flashed a single glance as he rode by. Quite distinctly they heard him halt and dismount by the great door, then, startlingly distinct, there sounded a sharp rat-a-tat on the oak. They looked at each other.

"An honest man after all !" said Sir Harry with relief.

"No," croaked Passmore painfully. "It may be no more than a ruse to get the door open ! Have you thought—those others may have hidden by the steps ready to rush."

"But to answer a rapping on the door it is not necessary to open it," answered Sir Harry. "Do you watch the windows whilst I learn who the caller is."

He moved quickly out of the room, followed by Catherine, and standing by the door with her at his shoulder he called out :

"Hallo there ! Who knocks ?"

"'Tis I. Supervisor Mackworth ! Is all well here ?"

Catherine gave a little cry of relief.

"It is the Revenue officer. I recognize his voice. It will be safe to open to him."



Sir Harry wasted no time. Without more ado he slipped the bolts and threw the door open, revealing a short stocky man, who stood upon the steps, riding-switch in one hand whilst he held the reins in the other. The officer looked curiously and sharply at Sir Harry, who stood with the pistol in his hand ; then, as his eyes lighted on the girl, he spoke quickly.

" I hope I have not disturbed you for nothing, Miss Catherine ! But this is a lonely house, and whilst riding down the road I heard a cry as of someone hurt ; then the sound of a whistle, and saw a handful of men run from your gates. I hope there is nothing amiss."

" Well, officer," laughed Sir Harry, " there was a man hurt—one of those men you saw, I fancy, through whose arm I thrust a sword when he was trying to open one of those windows."

" A sword ; an', by the saints ! there's one lying here by the steps. I had just marked it when you opened the door."

He stooped and picked up the weapon, which had fallen from Roger Passmore's hand when Sir Harry's blow had knocked him senseless, and as he looked at it he cried :

" The villains must have left it behind them ! "

" No," answered Sir Harry, forgetting the girl at his side. " It belongs on the rack behind us ! Mr. Passmore let it fall when——" He stopped suddenly as Catherine moved sharply, and as he saw her eyes fixed upon him questioningly was thrown into further momentary confusion. He did not continue his explanation, but addressing her directly he said : " Would it not be as well to invite Mr. Mackworth inside ? He may be very useful if those scoundrels should return."

" Of course," said the girl quickly. " Your horse, Mr. Mackworth——"

" Can be taken to the stables," said Sir Harry. " I will go with the officer. If you will close the door, Catherine, and admit us on our return."

Mackworth looked at the sword in his hand.

" This—what shall I do with it ? "

"I will take that, Mr. Mackworth," said the girl quickly, and relieving him of it, stood looking at it curiously until her lover stepped out into the moonlight and began to walk with the Revenue officer in the direction of the stables. Then she closed the door, shot one of the bolts, and carrying the sword with her hurried to the room where Roger Passmore was.

The latter, having heard Catherine's reassuring recognition of the caller, had left the window for the fireplace, and was standing with one hand holding his throat. The light of the single candle on the mantelpiece fell full upon his face. It was extraordinarily pale, but there was a dark brooding look in his eyes, whilst his forehead was creased in a black frown. He started a little as he caught sight of the sword in her hand. Without giving him time to think, Catherine shot her question.

"You left this outside, Roger. I suppose you took it to challenge those men?"

"Yes!" he answered hoarsely, not perceiving the trap set for his feet.

"Then when you and Sir Harry went out to take the air, you went armed knowing those rascals were there?"

Roger Passmore divined suddenly that there was more behind the questions than he understood, and became suddenly cautious.

"Well—we had an idea—— We had—er—heard something. And it seemed advisable to be cautious, so as we passed the rack in the hall we snatched a sword apiece."

"A pretty tale!" commented the girl a little scornfully. "And one that does not agree with an earlier version. Two gentlemen go outside to take the air and enjoy the moonlight—and they take a sword each. . . . It is a new fashion for an evening stroll."

Her blue eyes in the candlelight were bright with suspicion as she looked at him, and he moved uneasily, divining that she was guessing perilously near the truth. Uncertain what to answer, the man answered nothing, but stood there, his eyes aloof from hers, and the black

frown grown deeper, whilst the girl watched him closely. Then deliberately he turned the subject.

"Who is that fellow who rode here just now?"

"Mr. Mackworth, the Revenue officer for the district. A capable man. I shall ask him to stay the night here. He will be of help in case those men return." Then swiftly she harked back: "One of that crew struck your throat, Roger?"

The words might themselves have been a blow on that tender place. The man started, his eyes blazed, and for a moment there was a twisted look about his mouth; then he broke out in the hoarse, croaking voice that it seemed was all he could achieve:

"Curses on the man! I'll kill him for it!"

Then said the girl deliberately, though the suspicion was still bright in her eyes:

"You know the man?"

"Know him——"

He broke off sharply, perceiving that whatever he should say he was bound to betray himself, and stepping to the table he poured out some spirit and sipped and swallowed it painfully, maintaining an obstinate silence, until the sound of the two men outside returning hurried the girl anew to the door to give them entrance.

As they passed from the hall into the dining-room, the girl with them, Sir Harry went to the mantelpiece and taking down the candle proceeded to light others from it, not once glancing at Roger Passmore, as both the girl and the Revenue officer were quick to observe. When he had finished, he set down the candlestick on the table, and addressed himself to Catherine.

"I think our troubles are over for the night. I have been talking to Mr. Mackworth, and I gather that the whistle I heard was sounded from somewhere near the gates, when he must have been visible to any watcher left there. No doubt it was a warning signal, and those vultures having once taken flight, are not likely to return to-night. Mr. Mackworth is willing to remain here——"

"I was about to propose it," said the girl, and turned to Passmore. "You agree, Roger?"

"Lord, yes!" cried Passmore hoarsely.

The girl flushed a little at his tone, then addressed the officer.

"My cousin has been hurt," she said, in a tone that implied apology for the man's manner. "We are very fortunate that you should have come so opportunely; and, believe me, very grateful for your offer. If there is anything I can get for your comfort——"

"Nothing, thank you, Miss Catherine, and as for the rest"—he laughed cheerfully—"finding this roof above my head, I am saved a cold ride. I shall be pleased to serve you by watching through the night with Sir Harry here."

Catherine smiled.

"Then I will go send the maids comfortably to their beds. I have no doubt they are twittering like frightened sparrows. Good night, gentlemen." Picking up the candle from the table, she left the room, closing the door behind her, and when she had gone, Roger Passmore remembered his duty as host.

"Help yourself, officer, to the wine or brandy—as your taste may be. There are glasses on the sideboard there."

The Revenue officer poured a glass of wine for himself, and then remarked slowly: "This is a serious business, gentlemen. I have never known a body of men attempt to raid a house like this before. What can there be behind it?"

His eyes were on Roger Passmore as he spoke, and the latter answered irritably:

"The devil knows!"

"Maybe! That is very likely, but it does not help——"

"Perhaps I had better explain a little further," broke in Sir Harry quietly, and forthwith launched into an account of the attack on the coach on the previous night, ending: "So you see, this is not quite an isolated affair."

The officer whistled thoughtfully to himself, then spoke.

"It is pretty serious. Something's got to be done.

I'm only a Revenue man, but as those rascals as like as not are connected with the smugglers on the coast here I may be of use with the help of riding-officers. But I shall need a warrant from a magistrate. Perhaps your father will oblige, Mr. Passmore?"

"My father is in feeble health," was the reply. "I should think you had better not trouble him. We had to tell him of that affair last night because of the death of his man, but if I have my way to-night's affair will be kept secret from him."

The officer nodded.

"Maybe you're right. I will look elsewhere, and I will watch the free-traders hereabouts in hope of tumbling on the men. They're bound to be lodged somewhere in the neighbourhood unless—— By the powers!" he ejaculated sharply. "Maybe that's it!"

"What?" asked Passmore swiftly.

"Why, they may come in from the sea. I had news this afternoon of a strange lugger that has been seen standing off the coast these five days or so—'twas that brought me along this way to-night. These ruffians may belong to it, and if they do the Revenue cutter may come in useful."

"What you suggest is possible," agreed Sir Harry, and flashed a glance at Roger Passmore.

What he saw gave him food for thought. The man was staring at Mackworth with a startled, apprehensive light in his dark eyes, as if he found the other's suggestion a troubling one; and suddenly he broke out:

"A lugger! Did you say a lugger, officer?"

"Yes! It's been on and off the coast the last few days, and it may easily have run in and dropped a boat to land these men who have troubled you to-night. Don't you think so?"

Roger Passmore nodded gloomy assent, and dropped the matter; and presently all three fell silent, and sat smoking, waiting, sometimes nodding, at other times made alert by some sound of the night. Twice or thrice Roger Passmore replenished the fire, and after the last time the



Revenue officer rose, stretched himself, yawned, and going to the window dragged aside the curtain.

"The dawn!" he said. "And a d——d dirty morning!"

The morning was indeed all he described it. The wind had changed, bringing a thaw, and a mist was blowing in from the sea, hiding a great portion of the landscape.

"That lugger won't be seen to-day," he commented. "She'll have to stand well out. . . . And I guess I've got a sloppier ride before me than I want."

After breakfast he took his departure, and Sir Harry went with him, after privately promising Catherine to ride over in the afternoon, to learn if there was any further and immediate need of his services. It was no more than a word he had with her, and that with Roger Passmore watching him with jealous eyes, making any tender passage between them impossible. The Squire kept his bed and him he saw not; and for his son as he rode away, he had nothing but a stiff "good-bye," but was very conscious of the raging look in the man's eyes as he rode past the window where he stood.

The dirty morning became a dirtier day, with a dripping mist hiding all the contours, and turning the snow to mush beneath the feet—a day to make a man hug the fireside and thank Heaven he was without need to go forth. Nevertheless, after lunch, Sir Harry went riding, with coat buttoned up to the chin and hat-brim pulled well down to protect his face from the chilling mist. And the way he took was not to Wyke House, but over the moor to the Scarborough road, with a thought in his mind that had germinated from an utterance of Officer Mackworth.

The officer had said that the ruffians who had occasioned his stay overnight were bound to be lodged somewhere, and considering that remark, it had occurred to Sir Harry that he knew the likely place. Those scoundrels would want few witnesses of their doings and no eavesdroppers for their councils, and the lodging they would seek would be for choice a solitary one. That indicated somewhere

away from the town, and almost instantly he had thought of "The Flask." A lonely house, set on the moor, and a place with few callers, it was the very place to serve as a rendezvous for men bent on a secret and desperate enterprise.

As he jogged on, the mist thickened, and the drifted snow made it difficult to keep to the road, which at the best was rough enough, grown here and there with heather, and under the snow difficult to distinguish from the moor itself. Two or three times he found himself astray in the heather, and only the distant surge of the sea away to his left enabled him to recover his direction. It began to grow dusk, and only an inherent stubbornness prevented him from abandoning his enterprise. The fog settled in beads on his eyebrows, and the beads trickling into his eyes obscured his vision ; the soft snow clogged in the horse's hoofs, adding to the difficulty of the way, which, by reason of the slowness with which he could safely travel, seemed interminable ; but at last he caught the lowing of a cow in travail, and with the sound, out of the mist in front, saw the inn lift itself shadow-like and surprisingly unreal in the rolling vapours.

The shutters and the door were closed, which in such weather was understandable ; save for the lowing of the sick cow, the place was utterly quiet ; but as he rode under the sign, the pleasant reek of peat-smoke was drifted down to him, and as he looked at the house and thought that the landlord was keeping a snug Boxing Day, he named himself a fool for his pains. There was nothing here to cause disquiet, and he had had his ride in vain. Nevertheless, he would make a call and take something to ward off the chill, before returning on his homeward way.

As he stood by the door, he thought he caught a sound of cheerful voices, which, however, ceased instantly when he rapped upon the panels. There was apparently some hesitation about replying to his summons, for though the sound of his rat-a-tat must have been heard all over the house, he had to repeat it before from within there came a sound of heavy steps upon the sanded floor. Then he

heard the bolts slowly withdrawn, the door opened a few cautious inches as if to allow the person within to take stock of him, and he laughed reassuringly.

"It is all right, my man——"

He got no further. The sound of feet slopping in the wet snow behind him made him look swiftly round, just in time to see two men in the act of precipitating themselves upon him. He was taken utterly by surprise. The weight and rush of the two men broke his hold on his horse, and swept him towards the door, which of the suddenest opened wide. With terrific force he measured his length in the stone passage, and whilst still dazed by the shock felt himself gathered up and thrust through a doorway into a candle-lit room, heavy with the reek of tobacco and the fumes of rum.

## CHAPTER XVI

### IN THE ROVERS' HANDS

**A**LL dazed and shaken though he was by that cruel fall upon the flags, Sir Harry, looking round, saw five men who sat staring at him, whilst the three behind remained between him and the door, blocking the least chance of escape. That they were mariners a single glance revealed, just as it thrust home on him that they were a villainous crew who, as like as not, followed the least reputable way of those whose calling was on the sea.

Most of them, as he saw, had long knives at their belts ; one had lost an eye, another had suffered a disfiguring slash across his cheek, and a third, who looked the most villainous of all, by reason of his deformity, had been deprived of his ears. There was grog upon the tables, cards and a dice-box ; and it was clear to him that whatever business had brought them here, the men were making themselves quite at home in this lonely moorland tavern. All this he took in at a flash, then suddenly one of the five

men in front of him, who had a bandaged arm, gave a wild shout :

“ Hell’s bells ! ”

He lurched to his feet and stood staring owlshly at the prisoner, whilst one of the others shouted : “ What’s biting ye, Tod ? ”

“ Shiver my timbers ! That’s the dog what laid out Lucifer last night ! ”

There was a sharp craning of necks. One of the men behind stepped forward and peered into the prisoner’s face as if he suffered from short-sightedness ; then an oath ripped from him.

“ By——, ’tis true ! An’, what’s more, he’s the man who rode down on us when we stopped that coach two nights back.”

There was a chorus of shouts, and one man drew a knife and sat with it balanced significantly in his hand. Then above the din one voice made itself heard commandingly.

“ Tie the swab up ! We’ll make him talk. He’s thick with Lucifer. He’ll know his secret.”

“ That be d——d for a tale ! ” roared another. “ Didn’t we see them fighting ? ”

“ Aye ! ” shouted the man who had given the order. “ And didn’t we see him give him the hilt on the steps, an’ fling the Captain in the house—a dead man by the looks of him. An’ who was it stuck Tod through his arm if it wasn’t this swab ? ”

“ Blazes ! Tortuga ! Ye’ve sure hit the bull’s-eye ! ”

“ Then tie the beggar up ! We can settle his hash at our ease like gentlemen of fortune should.”

Tortuga’s advice carried the day. In a twinkling, rope was forthcoming and the prisoner was scientifically trussed and thrust into a chair.

That he was in a tight corner, Sir Harry was assured. The men were a villainous lot, and if they were able to convince themselves that he was the man who had thrust Tod through the arm, and had thwarted their purpose last night, he was likely to receive short shrift. That man

with the naked knife in his hand was an embodied threat, and the others were likely to be as ruthless as he.

"Make the swab talk, Tortuga! If he don't, just twist a string across his temples."

The man Tortuga, who was plainly some sort of a leader among the men, lurched forward a step and stood swaying and confronting the prisoner, with an odd assumption of judicial gravity, which he quickly forgot.

"Now, my gentleman," he said with a leer. "What about Lucifer an' the Paycock?"

Sir Harry stared at the man wonderingly. The reference to one-half of this cryptic question was clear enough, but the other was Greek to him. But that it had something to do with the pursuit of Passmore by these men seemed evident, and taking a chance he tried to provoke the man to a betrayal of the secret.

"Lucifer and the Peacock?" he echoed in puzzled tones. "I do not understand. Is it a riddle?"

"No, it's a question," growled the man with an imprecation, "an' ye'd best give a civil answer an' a quick one——"

"Shall I give him a prick o' the point, Tortuga?" asked the man with the naked knife.

"No hurry about that—yet, Duncan! . . . We gives the gentleman his chance, an' if he don't talk willingly, why presently he'll squeal like a stuck pig." The man turned to the prisoner again, and repeated his question. "Now, I asks ye politely as a Christian should, What about Captain Lucifer an' the Golden Paycock?"

"Lord knows! I know nothing of either!"

"An' that's a d——d lie," retorted Tortuga, a little note of ferocity creeping into his voice. Then he looked round and asked, "Where's Black Tom?"

Sir Harry caught his breath at the question. He recalled what Passmore had said about the black's knowledge of the keys of pain that would unlock the secrets of any heart, and he gave a little shudder. Clearly he was in a very tight corner indeed, and it behoved him to try to placate his questioner. Whilst he wondered how this



was to be done, one of the men answered Tortuga's question.

"He's nursing that d——d tiger of his, an' ye'll never get him, Tort. But ye know that George here is a wonder with the bow-string, an' I ain't no lubber with the brimstone matches."

Sir Harry had no wish to make direct acquaintance with either of the forms of torture which the man mentioned so callously, and he made haste to amplify his reply.

"I never heard of the man whom you call Lucifer until one of you shouted the name at me two nights ago ; but if, as I surmise, you refer to the man with whom I had the duel last night, why——"

"Ye surmise right, my jewel," said Tortuga, with an affable grin. "That's Cap'n Lucifer right enough an'——"

"My God !" broke out Sir Harry suddenly, in a voice of such startled horror that Tortuga stopped dead, and backed a pace whilst he stared at him wonderingly ; then he growled :

"Perdition, man ! What's hit ye ?"

Something had hit Sir Harry and hit him hard—just a recollection of a terrible story of the Eastern seas with which the name of Captain Lucifer had been coupled, and which, by some obscure mental association, the name on Tortuga's lips had called to remembrance. It was an utterly shocking story of an act of piracy conducted with almost every circumstance of brutality and horror, and which, though piracy was common enough, had been whispered about with shivers in every civilized port, and as Tortuga shouted his surprised question, he himself shouted back :

"Is he Lucifer of the *Black Adventure*, who sacked and burned the *Saint Christopher* ten years ago ?"

"That's the man. Ye've got his pedigree to a nicety—the *Saint Christopher* an' many another rich ship !" The man laughed callously. "Hornygold there was with him when they took the *Saint Christopher* an' collared the Golden Paycock among the rest of the loot. So now maybe ye'll own up !"

"Own up to what, man?" demanded Sir Harry irritably, for the moment forgetting his position in the surge of horror that the realization of Passmore's identity with the most bloodthirsty rover of the seas had brought to him.

His tone stung Tortuga. A cruel light kindled in the man's eyes.

"Ye'll keep a civil tongue, or by the Powers, Duncan there shall cut it out for ye!"

"But not before he's spoken an' told us where the loot is, Tortuga," said Duncan with a grin.

"Before God!" cried Sir Harry, "I know nothing of loot; scarcely anything of the man whom you call Captain Lucifer. If I had known who he was last night, when I was fighting him, I'd surely have run my sword through his black heart."

Tortuga laughed unbelievably.

"Now here's a d——d play-actor!" he cried. "Ye'd have run your sword through his black heart, would ye? Now what I want to know is why the devil didn't ye, when ye had the fine chance?"

"Aye!" broke in the man Tod, "you was ready enough to stick a poor sailor-man who was after getting his rights. Why didn't you stick Lucifer? You had the chance more than once, but you didn't do it. No! you took him to the steps an' we watches you innocent as lambs, never thinking what you was after, till you'd knocked my gentleman sick and chucked him inside an' bolted the door in our faces. Why didn't you spit him like a silly chicken? That's what I wants to know!"

Sir Harry chose the way of truth, deeming it would serve him best.

"Oh, I can oblige you there! I had meant to kill the man till I saw you in the bushes——"

"The devil!" cried Tortuga.

"It is the truth. We had quarrelled——"

"What about?" snapped the man Hornygold, who had been with Lucifer at the sacking of the *Saint Christopher*.

"About a girl——"

"By the Blood an' the Rood!" roared the man with the knife. "That little doxy in the post-chaise. She's up there in that house with Lucifer. Black Tom saw her."

Sir Harry wished he had not mentioned the cause of the quarrel, realizing suddenly that if these men had the wit to see it, he had presented them with a very potent weapon for use against Passmore, and which might mean infinite peril for Catherine. He resumed hurriedly.

"The man struck me, and since I take a blow from no man, we fought——"

"Aye, but ye saved him," broke in Tortuga. "Ye know that an' we know it, every man-jack of us!"

"That was for the sake of his father—a very sick old man. Of the man you call Lucifer, I know less than you have told me. I am newly come to the Bay. I never saw the man in my life till two nights ago when we met in this very room——"

"Oh! my eye! There's a tale of cock-an'-bull!"

"It is the simple truth!" asserted Sir Harry quietly. "Call the landlord and he will bear witness to it. Why, the man stole my horse and rode away on it, his own having fallen lame. The innkeeper had to borrow me a mount before I could continue my journey. Call the landlord, I say——"

"Gommorah! Yes! Call the landlord, Tortuga. Let's deal fair like gentlemen of fortune does. If the man's lying we'll know then, an' by the flames! we'll roast the truth out of him on a spit."

Tortuga moved to the door and bawled down the passage: "Landlord!"

The innkeeper came at the run, a scared, cowed look upon his face, and it was evident that he stood much in fear of the company who had taken possession of his inn. When he saw Sir Harry sitting in the chair, bound, a look of wondering fear leaped in his eyes.

"Take a glint at this gentleman," said Tortuga, "an' tell us when last ye put eyes on him?"

"Two nights ago for the first an' last time," answered the innkeeper in a shaking voice.

"There was another here?"

"Yes a—a—dark——" The landlord's terror was too much for him. His shaking voice broke, and for the moment he was unable to continue.

"Take a hitch on yeerself, man, an' stop your dithering. Nobody's going to bite ye. About this other hero? Out with it—sharp!"

The snap of the last word braced the frightened man.

"A dark gentleman with gold ear-rings, who kept us lighting the candles whilst he shot them out with his pistols——"

"That's Lucifer!" broke in Hornygold. "Shootin' candlewicks is an old trick of his!"

"When this gentleman came, the other stole his horse, and I had to go down to the miller's an' borrow his cob, that this one might go on his way, him being Sir Harry Plaxton, of the Priory above Bay Town."

"*Custos rotulorum* and what not! I'll dare swear," broke in a man who had not yet spoken, and who was plainly of more cultured breed than the rest of the men.

"Not to my knowledge," said the landlord. "His uncle sat on the bench forty years, but Sir Harry being newly come——"

"Makes no difference," interrupted the last speaker, addressing not the landlord but his fellows. "He knows we're here, and he'll be hand and glove with every magistrate in the Riding."

"An' there's my arm," broke in the man Tod. "He's sure got to pay for that, Tortuga."

Tortuga caught the shaking landlord by the neck, twisted him to the door and spoke a single word:

"Run!"

The landlord hurried down the passage as for his life, and Tortuga shut the door with a crash, and looked round.

"What's to be done? The Professor is right. If we let this guy go, we'll have every magistrate in the Riding at our heels."

"Let me take him out on the moor an' stick him," said the man with the knife. "They'll never find him in a year."

Tortuga looked round as if to collect the opinion of his fellows. There was no mercy in his cruel eyes, nor in any other so far as Sir Harry could see.

"I put in the black bean!" said one of the men.

"An' me!" cried Tod viciously.

"And I!" said the man whom Tortuga had spoken of as the Professor. "It is a harsh necessity."

"An'——"

The fourth speaker never finished. He turned his head sharply in the direction of the shuttered window.

"There's somebody outside—a horseman, halting here! Who the deuce can it be?"

And, listening, Sir Harry distinctly caught the sound of a horse's unshod hoofs striking through the mushy snow to the stones beneath.

## CHAPTER XVII

### AN ENCOUNTER IN THE FOG

THE look on the faces of the men about him told Sir Harry that they were in some uncertainty as to whom the new-comer might be. For a moment they stood listening, plainly in doubt, and he himself indulged in extravagant hopes. Travellers on the moor at this season of the year were few, and whilst the chances were that the new-comer might be some man journeying to Scarborough or Whitby, driven to seek shelter by the vile weather, he found himself thinking of Mackworth, the Revenue officer, and had a thought that possibly he had discovered the rendezvous of this villainous crowd, and was taking steps against them. But in that case why had he come alone, for as the sounds told him, but one horseman had ridden up to the window?

Scarcely had he asked himself the question when there



sounded a peremptory rapping on the panels. Three separate rat-a-tats were given and then a single sharp blow.

The tense look on the listeners' faces disappeared as by magic. The man Hornygold laughed.

"Lor', what fools we be for sure ! 'Tis the Nabob ! "

There was a general movement expressive of relief. The man with the naked knife slid it back into its sheath ; Tod, of the wounded arm, took a swallow from the mug before him, and as Tortuga turned to leave the room, called after him :

"Better tell him, Tort, about——"

A jerk of the head indicated their prisoner, and realizing that the new-comer was a man of authority among them, Sir Harry waited with some anxiety for what was to follow, certain that in the next few moments his fate would be decided.

Tortuga left the room, and, as the ruffians sat quite still, the sound of his steps and the slipping back of the bolts were clearly audible. Then to his straining ears there came the hoarse tones of Tortuga's voice, doubtless explaining the situation ; but no more than an indistinct murmur to those in the room ; and on the heels of it a sharp peremptory voice sounded clearly :

"But this is confounded foolishness, Tortuga ! Do you want to embroil us with the whole countryside ? "

It was, despite its peremptoriness, a pleasant cultured voice—the voice of a gentleman, Sir Harry decided, though it was difficult to guess what association its owner might have with the ruffians in this tavern tap-room, and he strained his ears to catch what followed. Tortuga's hoarse voice raised itself in expostulation.

"But damme, sir, he was with Lucifer last night ! He's the man who fought with him on the terrace—and diddled us as neat as any Israelite as ever came out of Jewry."

"Then if he fought with him, he is no friend of Lucifer's ! "

New hope surged within Sir Harry as he caught the words. Plainly the new-comer, a man of weight among the ruffians, was of different calibre from his associates.

"But Hornygold reported to ye, sir," protested Tortuga. "The man saved Lucifer from us at the finish, by knocking him senseless and shutting the door in our faces. What d'ye make of that, sir?"

"Why, that the man's a gentleman—a thing you'll never understand, Tortuga. You're a handy man with a knife or a cutlass, but, stap me! you've got no mind for the finer points of conduct. That is just what a gentleman would do in the circumstances."

An inarticulate growl was Tortuga's answer, at least as it reached the listeners in the tap-room; then after an interval came the question:

"But, blazes, what are we to do with the man? He knows about us. If we let him loose, next thing we know we'll have a squadron of dragoons a-knocking on the door here, an' every man-jack of us will be for the chains an' the tar. An' I'm not burning to have every mariner who sails past Execution Dock pointing a finger for the cabin-boy to take a squint at my rattling bones an' take a warning."

A laugh, pleasant in timbre, followed.

"Tortuga, you have a confoundedly gruesome imagination! We're a long way from Execution Dock yet, though I will own that, left to yourself, you'll get there just as fast as horseflesh can carry you. . . . Can't you see that to interfere with a man of quality for no reason at all is to raise the whole countryside against us, and in that case what becomes of the Golden Peacock on which your heart is set? . . . The whole crew of us will have to quit as fast as the wind can carry us, and leave Lucifer with the spoils."

"I always said that Tortuga was a fool!" remarked the man known as the Professor. "He——"

A growl of impatience from the others assembled in the room cut short his comment. Like Sir Harry, they were anxious to hear what the man in the passage had to say. But the conversation dropped to a lower key, and only broken sentences reached the listeners in the tap-room.

" . . . Yes, to-night. This tavern is too public. Any chance caller might lay an information . . . too far from the sea ; but the boat can get in there, and there's a way out if trouble comes at the last . . . a day or two yet . . . Lucifer's no fool, and he has friends among the fishers and smugglers in Bay Town. That much I've learned down there——"

For a moment Sir Harry heard no more of the disjointed sentences. Who was the speaker? How had he, a stranger, been able to learn things about Roger Passmore in Bay Town? Suddenly, by a trick of mental vision, from the height of horseback, he was staring into the inn-window, watching Peter Harland standing obsequiously before the man with the burning eyes and pallid, austere countenance—the guest who had guineas to spend. Was that the man who was talking with Tortuga in the passage and on whom, as he was assured, his life depended?

He would have wagered half his fortune upon it, and in that moment he would have given the other half for a glimpse of the stranger's face. But he had to be content without it, and when next he caught anything from the passage it was in Tortuga's growling voice.

" What's to be done with the swab? Turn him loose, an' as like as not he'll ride straight to Lucifer, an'——"

" Are you so sure of that? Last night, remember, they were at sword-points with each other. Why! I——"

" A matter of a wench up at that house," laughed Tortuga, " a pretty doxy——"

" A girl? "

There was something in the tone in which the question was asked that sent a chill through Sir Harry's blood—a sudden cold ferocity exceeding anything that he had overheard. Then followed a hard, mirthless laugh.

" I must think of that. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is scriptural justice, and that girl——"

For a time no more was to be heard in the tap-room, then clearly came the words: " No . . . but I'll take a mug in the kitchen. It is a chill night out of doors."

Steps sounded coming up the passage. Sir Harry tried to turn his head, but failed to get eyeshot of the doorway, and the two men passed without his seeing them. Then the men in the room fell to talking, and a little time after the steps going in the reverse direction sounded afresh, the door opened and closed, and again faintly through the shuttered window sounded the hoofs of a horse.

Tortuga re-entered the room. He looked at Sir Harry with mock dolefulness.

"Better get to prayin'," he said. "Ye're for the plank, my gentleman."

Sir Harry did not believe him, and was unconcerned on that score. But he was troubled to think how long he might be detained, and more troubled by the unknown's reference to Catherine. His cryptic words had suggested that he saw in her some means of revengeful action against Passmore; and as he thought of his own helplessness his apprehension for her mounted. She would go her ways without thought of any danger to herself. It would be the easiest thing in the world for these men to abduct her and in that case—— He shuddered at the possibilities, and sat there, more worried than he could possibly have been if Tortuga's grim jest had been grimmer truth.

The men in the room gathered together in a corner and began to whisper to each other, and presently into the room came the great black whose face he had seen at the window of Wyke House two nights before. The man's dark face expressed almost infinite melancholy and grief, and a moment later the cause for that was made apparent.

"How's the pussy-cat, Tom?" asked Tod.

The black's face was suddenly convulsed with emotion; he made a tragic gesture and ejaculated a single word:

"Dead!"

"Then that's another for ye against Lucifer. I guess that bullet of his an' the cold together killed it—but ye can put 'em both to Lucifer's account, hey?"

The black's eyes seemed to glow red in the candlelight,

and as the men resumed their whispering, Sir Harry found himself thinking that if from Passmore had gone one cause of terror, the danger in which he stood was in no way lessened ; the death of the cheetah, for it was unquestionably that animal to which Tod had referred, having doubled the ferocity of its master against the slayer.

After a little while the men fell to dicing and card-playing. An hour passed, slowly enough for Sir Harry, and then Tortuga with a glance at the clock, shouted to the others :

“ Time to quit, my hearties.”

There was an instant movement on the part of the men in the room, all of whom left it, Tortuga making a ferocious gesture at the prisoner as he went ; and after an interval there was a pounding of heavy feet in the passage, followed by the slamming of the door and the turning of a key in the lock. From outside came a burst of riotous voices the oath of a stumbling man and the half-tipsy mirth of others at his misfortune, and then silence.

Sir Harry listened intently. Was he alone in the inn ? Had those men left him, bound, to shift for himself or to be freed by any chance passer-by ? He remembered the locking of the door. That seemed significant. But what had become of the landlord ? Had the ruffians taken him with them ? And there was a girl—he remembered the girl, though he had seen nothing of her since his arrival ; what had happened to her ?

The inn was intensely silent, so silent that the ticking of the clock and the drop from the eaves outside seemed portentous sounds. He decided to call out, and did so loudly :

“ Hullo ! landlord. Hullo-o ! ”

There was no answer. He tried again, his voice ringing hollowly as through an empty dwelling, and again there was no response ; but listening carefully he thought he caught a faint sound of movement in the next room. He shouted a third time.

“ Hullo, there ! Hullo, landlord ! ”



Then came an utterly unexpected answer from the adjoining room.

"For the Lord's sake, be silent, sir, or you'll bring those villains back!"

He recognized the landlord's voice and cried to him peremptorily:

"Come here, man, if you can. I'm tied up. Bring a knife and cut me loose."

"Not for an hour, Sir Harry. That's the time fixed. That devil they call Tortuga swore to slit my throat if I loosed ye before the clock struck, an' he'll do it, as sure as God made little apples!"

"Fool! He'll never come back! Bring the knife!"

There came a sound of shuffling feet, and the landlord, a terror-stricken and woebegone man, entered the tap-room, and looked at Sir Harry lugubriously.

"Quick, man! Don't stand there like a sheep. Cut me loose."

"I daren't, Sir Harry. I vow I daren't! That Tortuga——"

"Ass!" fumed the other. "Don't you realize they've gone, and that they won't return. Get the knife!"

But the landlord, obstinate in his fear, would not.

"One hour," says Tortuga, "an' one hour to the last tick it's got to be. Would ye have me killed, sir? If ye knew the hours I've spent since Christmas Eve——"

"They've been here since then?"

"Showed up an hour after ye left, sir, an' have been here mostly ever since. They've drunk the house almost dry——"

"Without paying?"

"Never a stiver paid among the lot of 'em. Till that one came a little while back, I was a ruined man. But he paid—an' paid well."

"What like of man was he?" asked Sir Harry sharply.

"I never saw his face. He was masked like a tobyman, but he talked and parted with the guineas like a gentleman."

"Um! Where's your daughter?"

"Ran off across the moor to my brother's house three hours back, her being scared to death when Tortuga tried to kiss her."

"Then we are alone! Landlord, I must get out of this quickly. Cut me loose and there's five guineas for you——"

"Not for five hundred guineas, Sir Harry. My life's worth more. If those rascallions knew I'd left the kitchen, they'd burn the house over my head as like as not. An' they may have left a watch! Be patient——"

"Patient, you white-livered lunatic! Cut me loose."

"In five-an'-forty minutes, Sir Harry, I'll do it gladly, till then——"

He began to shuffle out of the room, and Sir Harry swore roundly, threatening him with divers ills, but the man took absolutely no notice, and recognizing that his fear of the men who had gone forth had thrust him beyond either persuasion or bribery, he sat there fuming, watching the clock, waiting till the time should pass, and harassing himself with troubling thoughts. The minutes went by with leaden feet, but at length the hour ticked itself away, and the landlord, apologetic of countenance, reappeared with a knife in his hand.

"Ye won't bear this against me, I trust, Sir Harry——"

"Cut, you fool!" commanded Sir Harry curtly.

The landlord obeyed, and the other stood up stiffly, and as he began to rub his arms, gave an order:

"Bring me brandy."

The innkeeper brought it, and as he sipped it Sir Harry asked:

"What happened to my horse?"

"It's in the stable, sir. I saw to that. If those villains haven't a-took it——"

"Go see."

"I can't, sir. We're locked in back an' front with all the lower windows shuttered."

"There are the upper windows! Take a candle and lead the way!"

The man hurried to obey him, and within three minutes

Sir Harry was peering through an open lattice into a fog so dense that he could not see the ground.

"What's below?" he demanded.

"Just a patch o' garden——"

Sir Harry waited to hear no more. Without delay he began to wriggle through the lattice, and for one moment before dropping hung with extended arms, kicking with his feet. He caught the wood of the shutter below, and knowing he had but a little way to fall, loosed his hold with confidence, alighting upon his feet, without mishap.

Then in the dense mist he felt his way round the house to the stable. A faint glimmer caught his eye. It was a lamp hanging upon a nail which had been left burning by someone. He looked round. His horse was there, ready saddled. It whinnied as he spoke to it, but as he approached he found it all a-sweat and trembling like a leaf. His first thought was that someone had had it forth and that it had been over-ridden; but a glance round revealed the truth. By the dim light of the lantern he descried something lying on a pile of hay in a corner, and made out the form of the cheetah—dead, but whether of the cold or of Passmore's bullet he could not tell.

Without delay he led his horse forth, and groped his way to the front of the house before mounting. A faint radiance at the upper window told him that the landlord was still there with the candle, doubtless listening for his departure.

"Fool!" he muttered to himself, as in the thick mist he set his horse on the homeward way, giving him his head and trusting his instinct to lead him to the stable.

He was wise in that. Not once did the animal make a mistake, so far as keeping to the road was concerned, though in the fog he went astray of the Priory, and suddenly Sir Harry found himself ascending a hill when by right he should have been descending. He drew rein, and just as he did so, out of the fog ahead came a sudden scream of pure terror, followed by the sound of a blow, then by the sound of someone jumping from a little height, and immediately after the splash of hurrying feet in

melting snow. Someone was running. Whoever it was, was coming straight for him, and was very close on him, though unseen in the mist.

"Look out there!" he shouted warningly, just as the unseen runner crashed into his horse.

The beast reared, the man who had collided with it went down, and Sir Harry, as soon as he could quiet his horse, slipped off, and was in the act of stooping over the man when the latter, recovered from the shock of his fall, rolled over, lifted himself to his feet, and slipped away in the mist before Sir Harry could speak.

He shouted after the man, who took no notice whatever, and as he stood there wondering who had given that cry of fear, he heard a moaning sound somewhere above his head.

"Hullo!" he cried. "Hullo!"

There was no answer but the moan. Blindly he began to go forward in the direction of it, and as he did so his foot kicked against something heavy. He stooped and groped for it, and finding it, discovered that it was a pistol which the running man had dropped. He stood with it in his hand a moment, wondering, and as he did so a little gust of wind blowing in from the sea rolled the mist back, giving him a glimpse of a white gravestone just above his head, and in the same instant there sounded again that little moan, amazingly eerie in quality now that he had realized that he must be standing just beneath the churchyard wall.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A CHURCHYARD MYSTERY

CARRYING the pistol with him, and feeling his way along the wall, Sir Harry made his way to the churchyard gate, and there hitched his horse. Passing inside, he began to stumble among the tombstones in the direction from which the sound came. A faint glow caught his eyes as he stumbled on, and making his

way to it, he discovered that it was a lantern, lying on its side, the candle guttering but still burning. Picking it up and holding it close to the snow-covered ground, he came presently on a man lying in the snow, moaning, who, as the lantern revealed, had suffered a sharp blow on the forehead. But the man was certainly as much frightened as hurt, for his eyes were open, and he was quite conscious, though plainly badly scared.

"Who are you?" asked Sir Harry sharply.

"The sexton," answered the man. "Is that murderin' devil gone?"

"A man leaped out of the yard as I came," said Sir Harry with caution, "if he——"

"That's the scamp for a crown! I heard him working——"

"Working? Here?"

"As I'm a living man, I heard the clang of a trowel, and once I glimpsed a light. 'Twas that brought me into the yard, me being clerk and sexton and held responsible by the parish. I'd have thought it was the free-traders hiding contraband, but there's been no run in the Bay that I've heard of, and I shouldn't ha' interfered with them who keep me in bacca. But, thinks I, here's some rascal body-snatcher at his ghostly job, so I crept forward as quiet as a mouse, I thought. But the rascal heard me, an' hiding behind a stone, landed me a hard one. I screamed out——"

"I heard you."

"An' then the scoundrel ran, an' that's all I know."

"You didn't see the man to know him?"

"Shouldn't know him from Adam or any more nor I know you."

Sir Harry laughed.

"My name is Plaxton. I live at the Priory——"

"Oh, I've heard of you. An' I'm mortal thankful to you, sir, for——"

"Do you think you can walk?" interposed Sir Harry.

"I'll make a shift. 'Tis but a few yards. No need for you to trouble, sir."



"I'll help you to the gate. Up you get! Steady! Now you'll be all right."

He helped the man to the gate, handed him the lantern, and assured that the sexton could manage for himself, mounted his horse anew and rode on his homeward way. The moon was rising and the fog growing less dense, so that now it was comparatively easy to find his direction, and as he rode he was lost in thought, reviewing the events that had befallen since his setting forth.

When he reached the Priory, he found that he still had the pistol in his hand, having borne it unconsciously all the way from the churchyard, and as he stood in his hall, well illumined with candles, he suffered a shock. The weapon was mounted with silver, beautifully chased, and at the first glance he recognized it for one of the pair belonging to her uncle, which Catherine had brought for the defence of the house on the previous night.

He entertained no doubt whatever of that, and even if he had the weapon itself bore convincing evidence, for inscribed on the silver at the butt was a monogram artistically wrought.

"R.P.," he read. "Who else can it be?"

He did not know the christening name of Squire Passmore, but it seemed more than likely that it was the same as his son's, and as that probability thrust itself upon him, his mind jumped to a further conclusion.

"But in heaven's name, what was young Passmore doing there in the dark, working—with a trowel?"

He stood there staring at the pistol, a little staggered by the thing to which it pointed, striving to probe the mystery involved, whilst a little distance away, watching him curiously, the woman who had charge of his household hovered with a silver salver on which a letter reposed. Plainly the woman hesitated to intrude upon his absorption but chancing to glance round he saw her.

"What is it, Mrs. Braviner? Something for me?"

"A letter, Sir Harry, from Wyke House. It came two hours ago, by the hand of Squire Passmore's man."

He took it, glanced at it sharply, and saw that the

address was in feminine hand ; then he walked to his library with a sense of elation, thinking to himself that here was a letter from Catherine. He was right in that, but his elation went at a stroke as he read.

“ Oh, my dear, how shall I tell you—how write the evil tidings ? This afternoon my uncle was taken much worse. The physician from Whitby came on my earnest supplication, and did not conceal his conviction that my uncle is like to die soon. My uncle learned the truth from him, under pressure, and when the physician had departed summoned Roger and me to his room. There he told us what we had already heard from the learned doctor, and quite suddenly he expressed a wish to see us married before he should die. . . . My dear, conceive my quandary ! Roger was willing, and I—oh ! how could I refuse, knowing that my ‘ no ’ might be my uncle’s death-stroke ? I tried to temporize, not daring to speak the truth about you ; but he saw my hesitation and pleaded with me, sobbing like a child. . . . What could I do ? How refuse his request—to whom I owe everything ! There was Roger on the one hand willing, eager ; and my uncle on the other pleading with tears ; and at the back of my mind the remembrance of the will which my uncle had refused to alter. It seemed that I could not thwart him and rob Roger of everything. So—how shall I write it—in my weakness and in pity for my uncle, a dying man ! I beg of you to remember, I gave the promise. . . . If Judas had a sister she was like me, a betrayer of the love she cherished ! But promises to the dying are sacred. Even God in His mercy would not forgive one who should prove false to such a vow. So—my heart breaks ! I cannot write it, but you will understand, and on my knees I pray that you will forgive.

CATHERINE.

*P.S.* Farewell ! ”

As he reached the end of this broken-hearted epistle, a grim look came on his face ; then he broke out sharply :

"My God, no! She shall not be the little ewe lamb—she shall know all. . . . This very night!"

As the words broke from him the oaken clock in the hall began to strike. He counted the strokes. "One! Two! . . . Ten!" and for a moment he stood amazed at the passage of time, having had no idea of the lateness of the hour. He strode out of the room and stared at the clock's dial, unbelievably, thinking that something had gone askew with the chiming part of the clock. But the fingers on the dial were at one with the strokes, and he knew then that it was too late to do anything that night, since if he rode across to Wyke it would be to find Catherine already abed.

He returned to the library, and began to pace to and fro, his face indexing terrific emotion. Once he stopped and broke out explosively:

"God curse the man, as he deserves! . . . I will surely slay him."

He resumed his pacing, fighting back the despair which surged within him as he thought of the words she had written. "Promises to the dying are sacred."

"My God!" he whispered. "If the Squire should die before——"

He did not finish the words, he could not; but the thought haunted the background of his mind like some ghostly spectre. If the Squire died before the promise could be recalled, then it never would be. Women, the best of them, were like that, faithful to a shadowy honour, though the fidelity meant heartbreak. . . . If the Squire should die before morning——

Tormenting himself thus, he paced for an hour or more, then threw himself into a chair, to find new sources of torment in the thoughts he could not check. For the time all things else were forgotten, and the events which had befallen since he had ridden forth banished clean from his mind by the catastrophe which the girl's letter was to him. But as he sat there his eyes chanced to stray to the table where he had laid the pistol which he had brought with him from the churchyard. The sight of it

re-started a train of thought which gave him some relief from the thoughts that were like stinging scorpions.

What had Passmore been doing in the churchyard at such an hour—with a trowel? No pious work, that was certain! But what? What? He could find no clue to help him to an answer, and by association his thoughts went further afield to the men into whose hands he himself had fallen and had been so unexpectedly delivered. Last night he had saved him from those men and had been rewarded by a treacherous attempt upon his life. That was like Roger Passmore. His dark soul was rotten to the core. Some way he had been false to those associates in evil, as he had been treacherous to himself, and if Catherine, the victim of her own gratitude, married him, then——

For hours he sat, his mind moving from one aspect of the problem to another. Once he rose from the chair and crossing to the window dragged aside the curtain and looked forth. The fog had lifted, and the moon shone clear, revealing the dark contour of the Peak. He fancied that at the base he could see the long line of rock on which the *Golden Fortune* had met her fate. When Catherine knew the truth of her coming to Wyke——

Again his mind shifted to the nun who had gone through the snowy night to stare at Catherine through the window, and had fled in terror, as it appeared, at the sight of Roger Passmore. What secret of the past lay there? The men who had been at “The Flask” represented no mystery. At some time and somewhere—indeed for so long a space of time as ten years, unless Tortuga had lied—Passmore had been their associate, probably when the drunken mariner, of whom Harland had spoken, had seen him at Whydah in command of a tall ship—a ship that had flown the rovers’ hideous flag.

Of that those ruffians at “The Flask” had made no secret. The man, Hornygold, had been with him on the *Black Adventure* at the time of the sacking and burning of the *Saint Christopher*—the blackest crime of the seas in a generation. He would get Hornygold and take him to Catherine. Even if the Squire died in the night, the

knowledge that Passmore was Captain Lucifer would justify the breaking of the most sacred promise made in ignorance of that terrific fact.

"But the nun? What secret was hers?"

That was a mystery which baffled him; and at last, exhausted by his emotions, and worn out for lack of sleep the previous night, he slipped into uneasy slumber in his chair. . . .

He was wakened by the housekeeper kindling the fire. Dawn had broken as clear and bright as that of the previous day had been dirty, and as he rose stiffly from the chair, his eyes fell on the pistol lying on the table, glinting in the morning sun. He stared at it curiously for a moment, then a thought came to him, and bidding the housekeeper have breakfast ready in an hour's time, he went to his room, made his toilet, and after a little delay, for his horse to be saddled, rode over to the churchyard.

The church stood solitary on the hill, save for the sexton's house a little distance away. There the curtains were still drawn, proving the sexton a slug-a-bed; and he was able to make his examination without interruption.

Some snow, congealed by the frost which had followed the rising of the moon on the previous night, still lingered there, and he found no difficulty in following his own footsteps to the place where he had found the sexton lying after he had been struck down. A moment later he found something else—the trowel of which the sexton had spoken, and a small wooden pail which had held mortar of some kind.

The two last finds gave him a clue. Searching diligently among the tombs, he came at last to one, about which were many footmarks—a large tomb, with raised and enclosing sides and a table-like top on which was inscribed a single name which he read.

"Sacred to the memory of Mary Passmore, the dearly beloved wife of Roger Passmore of Wyke Hall——" He got no further.

"His mother's tomb!" he ejaculated. Then swiftly



the question came to him : ‘ What was he doing here—with a trowel and a bucket of mortar in the dark ? ’ ”

Assured that no exercise of filial piety had brought the dead woman’s son to her tomb in the mist and darkness, he made a careful examination of the stonework, and came on a slab of stone, which he was convinced had been newly fastened in, though the mortar had been daubed with earth, and even some scraps of the dark green moss which grew in the interstices between the other stones had been removed and pressed into the mortar, obviously, he thought, to hide its newness.

“ But why ? ” he asked.

At the moment the answer eluded him, as did the reason of that refastened slab. If one removed that, possibly the reason might appear. But he was no ghoul to desecrate the tomb of a dead lady in order to gratify his curiosity, however keen the latter might be ; and he left the stone where it was, and after tossing the bucket and trowel into a deserted corner where lingered the tall dry stalks of some last year’s weeds, he took his way from the churchyard, deeply exercised in his mind, but little or no nearer the understanding of the mystery. As he went, he noticed a shaking of the curtains in the sexton’s chamber, and guessed that possibly that worthy, newly roused from sleep, was observing him.

That fact interested him little, but as he rode homeward, halting his horse at the crest of the hill to take the view, he was intrigued to see another rider abroad, descending the steep road from Wyke House—in the direction of the church.

“ Roger Passmore,” he guessed to himself, and sat there watching until he saw the man hitch his horse to the gate, and pass into the churchyard. Then he continued on his way, reflecting on what he had seen, and what he must do before the day was through to prove to Catherine that her promise to even a dying man need not be binding.

## CHAPTER XIX

## NEWS OF A WEDDING

A CAREFUL consideration of Catherine's habits, so far as they were known to him, decided Sir Harry that the best hour for him to seek an interview with Catherine would be about noon. Then she would be free from the housewifely duties which, as he had observed, she followed diligently, and whilst the development of Mr. Passmore's sickness for the worse might keep the girl by his side, his chances of the interview would be improved. But the hours between must somehow be filled, and whilst there was much about the estate calling for the attention of its new owner, he felt that he could not possibly give himself to them that morning. In the end he decided to ride down to Bay Town, and interview Peter Harland about that guest of his with guineas to spend. If he could establish the identity of the unusual guest with that of the man whose coming so opportunely to "The Flask" had saved him from the rovers' hands, it might somehow prove of great service, for if he failed with Catherine, he could scarcely fail with Passmore if he confronted him with the authentic record of his past.

His mind was busy with the last as he rode down the steep descent to the inn. The knowledge he already had was sufficient to send Roger Passmore on his travels again. The man would scarcely stay at Wyke to face out a charge that if proved must send him to be hung in chains at Execution Dock—a warning to all mariners against forsaking honest ways. If he could make that knowledge perfect, and confront Passmore with the unchallengeable proof of his identity with the notorious rover, Captain Lucifer, then the man must go, surrendering Catherine, or hang!

There was, of course, a further alternative. He could force the man to new combat, fight him as he had fought him two nights before, and this time press the issue to the death. But the possibility that in that event the

dead man might rise like a shadow between him and Catherine, inclined him, notwithstanding his heat against the man, to the other less heroic courses. He would give Passmore two days to leave Bay Town or until his father died, at the most ; or he would inform the authorities of the man's black record.

He found Peter Harland in the street before his inn, with a number of others, discussing, as their demeanour revealed, something of more than common interest. At the sight of him, the man ran from his cronies, and holding to his stirrup whispered excitedly :

" Have ye heard the news, Sir Harry ? "

" What news ? "

" The news of the wedding that's to be between Roger Passmore and Miss Catherine."

" No ! " he said harshly, as he flung himself from his horse in front of the inn, and fastened the reins to the hitching-ring. " Come inside and tell me all you know."

He followed the innkeeper, who led him into his best room. " We'll be private here, sir——"

" Ah ! Then your guest has gone ? "

" Half an hour back, worse fortune ! He——"

" This wedding," broke in Sir Harry. " Where did you get the news ? "

" From the man himself. He was down here in high feather an hour back, and he made every man-jack in the street turn in here an' toast the bride that's to be ; an' there's a promise of gay doings come Saturday when the wedding is to be solemnized."

" Saturday ? "

" Aye, Saturday ! There's quick work for ye, Sir Harry. But it seems the old Squire's set on it and wants it to be before he dies, an' the maid's willing——"

" Did Roger Passmore say that ? "

" That—or as good. But I've a doubt that there's pressure been used, for Miss Catherine has the queerest notion for a wedding that any lass ever entertained."

" What is that ? "

" She wants an empty church ! "

"An empty church?" echoed Sir Harry wonderingly.

"So Passmore says, an' the request has gone forth. No man or woman is to be present save the pair the law requires. As they respect her, Miss Catherine demands that they shall keep away, that no man shall raise a cheer an' no woman weep after the way of women at weddings. She would go to a solitary church and ride back through empty lanes—alone with her sorrow, ye might think!"

"Almighty! Yes!" cried Sir Harry hoarsely, a stark look on his face.

"But to make up for that there's to be a revel in the town here. The bridegroom has promised an ox to roast an' free ale to all, an' a silver sixpence to every child——" Peter Harland broke off. "We're to be merry, ye see, but there's them who feel the ale would poison them! . . . Sir Harry, do ye reckon the maid knows about her coming to the Bay? If she don't, the thing is damnable, an' if she does then this wedding passes comprehension. Does she know—think ye?"

Sir Harry shook his head.

"I think not!"

"That's what most of the townsfolk think. The older folk all know, but they've held their tongue for Miss Catherine's sake, and because they liked the old Squire. And till Roger Passmore came back on Christmas Eve they'd come near to forgetting that black business of the *Golden Fortune*; but now they're all remembering and talking, an' there's a whisper among the women about a deputation to the parson, who if he'd do his duty would stop the wickedness—which it is, if Miss Catherine doesn't know."

He was silent for a moment, and Sir Harry with a grim look in his eyes stared out of the window across the sea to the foot of the Old Peak. The news of this swift wedding had taken him by utter surprise. It was beyond all anticipation. No man could have foreseen it. He was left but three days in which to counteract Passmore's machinations and bring all this evil scheme to nothing. Well, he thought to himself, now he must smite with

unsparing vigour. No consideration for that sick old man must stay his hand. The situation called for ruthlessness, if Catherine were to be saved—as saved she must be.

So far he got, when Peter Harland's voice broke on his thoughts again.

"There's a whisper of queer doings up at Wyke House, too, Sir Harry. They say that last night it was garrisoned like a fort, an' I know there were seven men of Passmore's old lot who never put nose in my tap-room yesterday, which isn't natural in them. 'Tisn't as if they was at sea. That'd be understandable. But their boats are there in the street, hauled up out of the tide. . . . Looks as if my gentleman were expecting trouble of some sort."

"It has that appearance," agreed Sir Harry, thinking to himself that Roger Passmore was following out his scheme of using his old associates of the Bay against the men whose presence in the district menaced both his peace and his life.

"Another thing. The pale gentleman who was here was mortally interested in Roger Passmore——"

"Ah !"

"He asked me questions about him, having, so he said, heard that he resided here ; which was a queer thing, considering that the man hasn't been here these fifteen years till Christmas Eve."

"Very queer !" agreed Sir Harry.

"He made me describe him most particularly, an' asked what like was Wyke House, an' how many lived there ; an' this morning, when Passmore was in the street, happening to pop in here unexpectedly, I surprised the gentleman behind the curtains there, staring forth at t'other with murder in his eyes——"

"Murder, Peter ? You're letting your fancy run !"

"No ! 'Tis gospel. The man was took all aback when he saw me, an' for once didn't know what to say, but presently he asked me if the man he'd seen was Passmore, an' when I told him of the wedding which Passmore was proclaiming abroad, he was all shook up with excitement as anybody could see with half an eye, an' when my



gentleman had gone from the street, he calls for his bill an' orders his horse, and was gone up the bank in ten minutes, with a word that maybe he'd be back to-morrow, him having to ride to Whitby on some business. But that was all my eye, for I climbed up the bank myself an' saw him take t'other road altogether."

Sir Harry considered this information closely, and found in it little comfort and not much light. That the man was an enemy of Roger Passmore's seemed certain, and that he was the man whose opportune arrival at "The Flask" had been so useful, he was convinced; but since he had gone there was nothing to be learned from him, and the news that the garrulous innkeeper had given him made it imperative that he should see Catherine without delay. He turned abruptly towards the door, but on the threshold paused.

"That deputation to the parson the women are talking about, Harland?"

"Yes, Sir Harry?"

"It has my sympathy. You may say so, if you like."

"An' mine, Sir Harry. But, Lor', our parson's a mouse! Roger Passmore would frighten him out of his skin if he shot a curse at him. I don't pin my hope there."

"Then where?"

"Well—there's yourself, sir!"

"Yes!" answered Sir Harry gravely. "Yes."

And without another word he went out to the street and to his horse. His face as he breasted the bank gave no indication of the tumult of emotion within him. Outwardly, he was ice, but within the fires were raging, and burning all the pity out of him.

"An old man," he muttered, "and drinking the lees of life! It is the young who must be thought of." And later: "Sorrow has been his portion. . . . It shall not be Catherine's."

At the top of the hill he set his horse's head towards Wyke House and spurred him forward. He swung through the gates at a pace, and as he approached the

terrace he scanned the windows. For one moment he glimpsed a white face at a lattice in an upper room—Catherine's. It was swiftly withdrawn behind a curtain, and for a moment he was smitten with a great fear. If she should refuse to see him——

"She shall!" he whispered to himself. "I will not be denied."

As he rode past the lower windows he looked in, but saw no sign of Passmore, and coming to the door he flung himself from the saddle and hammered with his whip-handle on the oak. A maid answered his summons, and to her he spoke sharply.

"Miss Catherine is within?"

"N-no, sir!" said the maid with a guilty air, doubtless following some instruction.

"I saw her at the window," he said brusquely. "Go! tell her I must see her . . . that I shall remain until I do."

The maid fled at his tone, and presently, flushed of face and moist of eye, returned.

"If you will please step this way, sir——" She invited him humbly enough.

He had already hitched his horse to a staple designed for that purpose, and he followed her into the dining-room. She would have shut the door quickly, but he intervened.

"One moment, girl. Who instructed you to tell that lie? Was it your mistress or your master?"

"It was . . . Mr. Roger, sir."

"Good! You may go."

"So," he whispered to himself as the girl hurried away, "Passmore is nervous. He takes precautions! Well—— It is an omen!"

He laughed a little grimly, and then froze to a listening attitude at the sound of a step on the stairs. The steps reached the hall, slow, weary steps, without elasticity, and he was telling himself that they could not be Catherine's, when the girl herself appeared in the doorway.

Her appearance shocked him inexpressibly. Her face was pale as death, there were deep shadows under her eyes, and the eyes themselves brimmed with sorrow,

whilst her whole bearing was one of utter melancholy. She looked, he thought, as if the spring of her years had suffered a fatal blight, as if—— He did not finish the thought.

“Catherine, my dear——” he whispered tenderly, as she closed the door and faced him.

“No! No!” she cried. “You must not call me that.”

“I shall call you that till I die,” he said swiftly. “None shall deny me the privilege. Not even you.”

“But you got my letter,” she protested. “I told you—I——”

“Yes! And I have brought it with me that we may burn it together.”

He produced it as he spoke, but she cried whisperingly :

“No! No! I cannot.”

Sir Harry was moved to passion by that cry.

“You cannot? You mean you will not, Catherine! But you shall! Do you think I will let you ruin your life for a promise wrung from you in such circumstances? Or that I will let Roger Passmore come between us? My dear, you do not know me if you think that to ease an old man’s passing I would leave you to such a fate. There are things you do not know; things that when you hear them will justify you breaking a thousand times the promise you have made.” He paused to choose his words, and then resumed.

“No one has ever told you how you came to Wyke House——”

“You are wrong!” she whispered brokenly. “My uncle told me—last night!”

For a moment he was dumb, recognizing that here was a lever on which he had depended to move her shivered in his hand before he could use it.

“Last night!” he said at length. “Last night!”

“Yes. He pleaded with me to give Roger the chance to make a complete reparation so far as could be, and because of my love for my uncle——”

“No uncle of yours, Catherine,” he cried.

"All I have known!" she said, with some dignity.  
"But for him——"

"But he did not tell you all. He could not tell you things he does not know. There are worse things than the wreck of the *Golden Fortune*, things which the Squire does not know——"

"But which I know," interrupted the girl quietly.

"You cannot know them," he cried incredulously.  
"It is impossible. The blackness of that man cannot be conceived of by you!" He paused and then went on vehemently. "How can you know them? I learned them in fullness myself but yesterday, and then in peril of having my throat cut; indeed for an hour, when I was tied hand and foot, with a man across the room balancing a naked knife in his hand——"

"Oh!" the girl cried in sharp concern. "You—— you—— Those men—they caught you?"

"I walked into their hands," he laughed, exulting in the care she showed for him. "And I learned much; much that I had already surmised, and more that I had not even dreamed about. Two days ago, when that pane there was broken, there was a device upon it——"

"I know," she interposed with a shiver. "You forget I saw it."

"But not clearly," he said. "The significance of it you cannot guess."

"But you are wrong," she said. "Wait, I will show you." She moved swiftly to an escritoire by the window, unlocked the lid, and took from within something which she carried carefully to the table.

"Look!" she whispered dramatically. "Look! And you will see how I learned the secret!"

Sir Harry stepped forward wonderingly, and suffered something of a shock. On a piece of dark board—the torn back of a book as he guessed—were a number of pieces of glass, their edges carefully joined. Fragments were missing, but the glass was clearly that of the broken pane, and most of the device limned upon it showed quite clearly.

"So!" he said. "So."

"I was curious," she explained. "I gathered the pieces together as well as I could—and when I arranged them so my cousin's secret leaped out at me. I guessed—oh! I guessed all that you have come here to tell me——"

"By Heaven, no!"

She waved her hand impatiently.

"Yes! Yes! And I did Roger something of an injustice as you are doing in your thought——"

"I tell you——"

"Listen! Listen!" she cried, in some passion. "For my sake, you must listen, for I would have you know the worst. Last night, before I—before I gave my promise, I taxed Roger with what was in my mind. Those men who were pursuing him were rovers, and it was easy to guess that he had been associated with them."

"Associated!"

The girl went on, unheeding the word spoken in bitter scorn.

"He owned the truth. He had been on a ship taken by the pirates. To save his life he had joined their confederation, and as soon as possible had deserted their ship——"

Sir Harry laughed suddenly, without mirth, laughter which startled the girl utterly.

"Why——" she began.

"Because Roger is the devil for cleverness. He thought to take the edge from a weapon he guessed I had, and so——"

He broke off sharply at the sound of a step outside, and swinging round, saw the man of whom he spoke passing the window with a dark, raging look on his face. He laughed again, well pleased at the sight.

"Now," he said, "now you shall hear the whole truth from the villain's own lips or I will kill him before your eyes."

But before he could think what she was about the girl



was running fleetly towards the door. She reached it, and turned the key which was within. Then dragging it forth, and holding it clutched to her bosom, she set her back against the door, and faced him, her eyes burning with fear.

## CHAPTER XX

## A GIRL BETWEEN

FOR a moment, as the girl stood there, with the key clutched to her bosom, Sir Harry was dumb. Here was an unexpected obstacle to the fulfilment of his threat, and it stung him that she should stand between him and the other, displaying, as it seemed, such concern for his rival's safety.

"You love him so much then?" he said, in the heat of anger, knowing all the time how unjust he was.

The girl blanched at the words, and for the moment quivered with distress. Then she replied passionately:

"Oh, you are cruel! You know that is not true! But I will not have uncle's dying hours disturbed by two men who have no thought for any but themselves. Would you slay the father as well as the son? Think what it will mean to him, lying sick-a-bed, if he should hear the ring of swords, as he dreamed he did the other night——" She broke off, and asked sharply: "You fought the other night out on the terrace there? . . . I guessed it when Mr. Mackworth found that sword upon our steps. But you shall not fight here this morning—except across my body. I swear it. Think! how should I tell that old man that his son was dead, if—if——"

The hall rang with the sound of hurried steps, and a second later someone tried the catch.

"Open! Open!" said a hoarse, peremptory voice.

"A fire-eater!" commented Sir Harry ironically.

"Two!" retorted Catherine. "With just a helpless girl between." Then she spoke swiftly to the man

outside. "Listen, Roger, I know what you seek, and I will not have it. . . . Think of your father——"

"Open!" came the interruption, in a voice that shook with passion.

"I will not," replied the girl steadily, "and I give you my solemn word that if you do not remove yourself and allow Sir Harry to depart unmolested——"

"No wish of mine!" broke in Sir Harry. "I'm for the swords!"

"Then, curse you, open the door!"

Sir Harry took a step forward. In his passion, he would have wrenched the key from the girl's hand, but she anticipated his action, and slipped the key into the bosom of her dress, then faced him with challenging eyes.

"Oh!" he whispered hoarsely. "You know not what you do. That man out there is not fit to live, and you would save him that you may wed with him. . . . Do you think you can keep us apart? . . . Open! And let us be done with it!"

The girl took no notice of his words. She turned and faced the door.

"Listen, Roger," she began in a voice that had in it a ring of determination. "You must go away——"

"I will not! I——"

"If you wish to marry me, you will obey me in this matter, for I vow before God that, promise or no promise, if you cross swords with Sir Harry to-day, I will never be your wife."

"But——"

"I mean it! If you do not retire and give Sir Harry a free passage—— No! if you do not withdraw beyond his reach, at once, I will not go to church on Saturday or any other time, so help me God!"

For a moment there was no answer, and Sir Harry found himself picturing the thwarted rage of the man on the other side of the door; then came an odd laugh, as if the man there found some humour in the situation. His answer followed.

"I shall obey you, Catherine. . . . But for Heaven's

sake let the man go quickly, lest I lose hold upon myself ! ”

There was a sound of feet withdrawing. And the girl stood there listening until they had quite died away. Then she fumbled for the key in her bosom, and had some trouble to withdraw it, and the blood running in her white face betrayed her embarrassment. But at last the key was free, and she spoke to Sir Harry tensely.

“ You will give me your promise not to seek Roger ? ”

“ No ! ” he answered brusquely.

“ Then you think less of me than he does.”

“ You forget,” he retorted. “ He has your promise—a promise wrung from you by contemptible means. And if I am not to marry you, I can at least save you from——”

“ Oh ! ” she whispered brokenly, “ and you love me, and show it by mocking my wishes !—I shall not ask you again.”

She began to insert the key in the lock, and remembering suddenly that there were things he had not yet told her, things that she must hear, he began to speak.

“ Wait, Catherine,” he said urgently. “ There are still things that I came to tell you. For your own sake, you must hear me.”

“ I shall not listen,” she cried. “ ‘ For my own sake ’ you urge. But where in all this am I acting for my own sake ? Think and find your own rebuke.”

She turned the key, and opened the door for him to go. Sir Harry made no move.

“ Quick ! ” she said, with a little stamp of her foot. “ Would you set all my suffering at naught ? ”

“ God knows I would stand between you and every pang ! ” he whispered passionately. “ And——”

He got no further. The girl flung him a single, tragic, heartbroken look, and then as if she could trust herself no more, fled incontinently.

“ Catherine ! ” he cried urgently, and ran to the door.

She was already half-way to the stairs, running like a deer, and she began to mount them, as he cried her name again, despairingly :

“ Catherine ! ”

She did not look round once. Straight up she fled, and whilst he stood there in the empty hall he heard a door close on the gallery above, and knew that he would see her no more that morning. He looked round slowly, despair and anger raging in his heart. He could not follow her to urge her further, and Passmore, as it seemed, was discreet, keeping himself from view. For a long minute, he stood there, uncertain how to act ; then since there was nothing else for it, he turned on his heel and walked slowly to the door, hoping that yet Catherine might recall him. But the door on the gallery remained closed, and with the tide of despair mounting in his heart he unhitched his horse, and climbed into the saddle. There for a little time longer he waited, and from a window overhead thought he caught the desolate sound of a girl's weeping.

“ Catherine ! ” he cried in a low voice. “ Catherine ! ”

The sound ceased, and as he still sat there, hoping against hope, round the corner of the house came a couple of men who eyed him curiously. They were obviously men whose calling was the sea, and they wore cutlasses, whilst each had a pistol stuck in his belt. He guessed that they were part of the garrison of which Peter Harland had spoken, and as they stood lounging a few yards away, their presence made further appeal to the girl impossible.

Slowly he moved along the terrace, twice glancing over his shoulder at the open lattice whence had come the sound of the girl's sorrow. But no delaying whisper reached him, no hand was stretched to beckon him back, and with despair a very flood within him, he rode slowly towards the gates. As he reached them, he looked back. The two men still lounged on the terrace. In the shadow of the great doorway a tall figure was standing—Passmore for a guess, and at an upper window he caught sight of a girlish form. He pulled up his horse, tempted to return, but the vanity of that thrust itself upon him, and with a feeling of utter helplessness he moved slowly down the road.

Below him the roofs of Bay Town were ruddy in the

wintry sun, and from the chimneys the blue smoke curled in the clean air. The sea was silver grey, a quiet tide flooding right to the base of the cliffs from Bay Ness to the Old Peak. A couple of fishing boats plied their trade in the Bay itself, and far out the white sails of a lugger gleamed in the sunshine, moving slowly northward.

He wondered idly if it were the lugger that Mackworth, the Revenue officer, had mentioned, and watched it thoughtfully for a moment or two. If it were, then there, he reflected, was the solution of the desperate problem which confronted him. He himself had utterly failed. Short of meeting Passmore in mortal combat there was, so far as he could see, no way by which he could of himself deliver Catherine from the fate to which for a scruple of gratitude she was surrendering herself. And she did not know the worst of Passmore. In his anger and stress of passionate protest, he had not told her that, and there was little likelihood of his finding any new opportunity to do so. If he turned back, Catherine would refuse to see him, would in all probability deny herself to him until after the fatal day which Saturday represented to her.

He thought of what Peter Harland had told him about the wedding arrangements—Catherine's own. No one to be in the church, no one in the lanes to cheer her—she would be a lonely bride, deliberately following a mistaken duty with a heart that she would sooner have taken to the grave. His soul was wrung as he thought of the emotions which moved her to make such melancholy dispositions.

"God!" he whispered. "How she must be suffering!"

The feeling of irritation provoked by her perverse devotion to duty, as she conceived it, died away. He no longer felt any anger that she should have stood between him and the man who was his enemy and her evil star. As he remembered her swift concern at the news that he had been in peril from the rovers, a great tenderness surged within him, strengthening his determination that at all costs he would save her from her black fate.



"I must," he whispered. "God help me!"

His eyes went to the lugger again. If the chance were given to those men they would cut the knot which he could not untie. He thought of the black who by Passmore's own admission had followed him across the world, and who would not be bought off; of that other man, whom Harland had seen at the inn window with murder in his eyes. Given the chance, the black would be ruthless, and the other, if he were the man who had come to "The Flask" yesterday was not a man to be lightly turned aside, for no weak man could have authority with that ruffianly crew.

"If they had the chance——" he whispered to himself, and then turned from the dark thought which had half-shaped itself in his mind. "No! I'm no Judas to sell even a scoundrel!"

Driven by black care, wrestling with the problem which confronted him, he rode far afield, and unconsciously made a circuit, which brought him on the moor above Wyke House. Looking down he observed that the two guards whom he had seen on the terrace were no longer visible, but by the gate a horseman was talking with another man—the latter from his attitude one of the men whom Passmore had brought from the town to act as guard.

He was too far off to see the equestrian's face, but that it was not Passmore he had evidence a few minutes later, for whilst he watched, the latter came out of the house, and was instantly joined by two men who followed him along the terrace halting when he halted. Apparently Passmore was interested in the man at the gates, for he stood staring for a little while in that direction, and then at a smart pace, with his two fellows at his heels began to hurry down the drive. The horseman, either aware of his coming or tired of his conversation with the guard, at the same moment began to ride away, slowly at first, but when hidden by the trees from the view of the men in the garden, at a smart pace.

Sir Harry was intrigued. The whole incident struck

him as curious, and anxious to prove a suspicion of his own, he clapped the spurs to his horse and rode across the moor to a point where he might hope to intercept the other horseman.

Pulling up behind a peat-stack, he waited with his eyes on the ascending road. When the other rider's head came into view, he would ride forth to meet him and see if he tallied with Harland's description of the guest who from the shelter of the curtains had watched Roger Passmore in Bay Town street.

But the man did not come. Five minutes passed, ten, and the road remained empty, and convinced that the man had taken some other way, with a sense of disappointment, he rode towards the crest of the road and searched the landscape for the rider who had stirred his suspicions.

## CHAPTER XXI

### AN ABDUCTION

ALL the wide cup of land below the moor and between Bay Ness and the Old Peak was open to his view, dotted with small farms, with here a patch of wood, there a rough road or a mere track leading to the moor, with the red roofs of Bay Town snuggling in the cove, for the centre of the picture. He looked first in the direction of the town, but drew a blank ; the horseman was not in sight.

Swiftly he examined each road, let his eyes wander over the fields, scanned all the tracks and each dark patch of wood, without finding the man he sought. The fellow, as it seemed, had vanished from the earth. But he continued to watch minutely, alertly, and presently his patience was rewarded, for he saw a rider emerge from a wooded lane a mile away, moving in the direction of the steep moor that led to the crest of the Peak.

How the man had reached that point, he did not know, probably by some rough bridle-path with which he was

familiar ; but he continued to watch until the rider dipped out of sight on a descending way. A thought came to his mind as he watched. The rovers had left " The Flask " for new quarters, nearer the sea as he guessed from the remarks he had overheard, and it seemed desirable that he should know where they were. It might help if matters came to a crisis.

He spurred his horse forward, and followed in the wake of the rider as fast as he could. Before long he lost sight of him altogether, but rode steadily forward, making for the point where he had last seen him. When he reached it, he found what was no more than a pack-horse track, which descended into a valley covered with gorse and brambles and hazels, with a stream at the bottom and a stiff ascent on the farther side. The stream he had known as a boy. It ran down to the pool of the old mill set at the end of the valley, so close to the sea that on wild nights the tide came roaring almost to the doors.

The track crossed the stream, and the fresh hoof-prints on the farther side told him that the horseman whom he followed had taken the ascent. He followed, but before he reached the crest of the ascent, saw that the rider had diverged, taking a narrow opening through the hazels across a neglected pasture-field full of the broken stalks of dead thistles. He was about to put his horse to the gap, when a cautionary instinct made him pause to reconnoitre, and a moment later he thanked Heaven that he had drawn rein.

Moving up the field from the farther corner were two men, one of them unknown to him, the other, the man Tortuga, whom he had seen at " The Flask," and who had been his chief inquisitor. As he saw the men, he dropped his head, and crouched low on his horse's neck, watching breathlessly, afraid lest his horse should grow restless, and still more afraid lest either of the men should turn and observe him through the leafless hazels.

The two were plainly deep in conversation. The rumble of their voices reached him across the pasture, but

too indistinctly for him to hear what was said. They kept steadily on until they were half-way up the steep ascent, and then halted suddenly to breathe themselves, turning in their tracks as men do on a hill, to look back on the way that they had come.

Would they see him? He prayed Heaven they might not, and remained perfectly still, until they turned again and resumed their way up the field. Then he took a deep breath, and lifting his head looked for their destination.

At the top of the hill was a derelict farm-house, with boarded windows. He remembered the place from his boyhood days. Some tragedy had occurred there long ago and the house having the repute of being haunted, and being withal exceedingly lonely and difficult of access for vehicles, had remained tenantless. But now, as he saw, the chimneys were smoking, and he entertained no doubt that it was here that the men whom he had seen at "The Flask" had found a temporary lodging.

He watched until the two men passed through a gap in the broken-down wall of what had once been the farm-yard, and a moment later heard the creaking of a door on rusty hinges, followed by a sharp noise as the door slammed. That the rider whom he had followed had sought this forsaken house, he was certain, and though he had not been able to establish his identity with Harland's guest, he had little doubt that he was the man. In any case there was nothing to be gained by taking further risks, and knowing the peril should he chance to be discovered, he turned his horse on the homeward way.

The short winter day was fading as he made the Priory with, as he told himself bitterly, his main problem unsolved. When the man-servant had taken his horse, before passing indoors he turned and looked at the sea, over which a dusky curtain was falling. As he looked, ghost-like through the gloom, he saw the lugger that he had observed as he had left Wyke House, now much nearer the land, and, even to his landsman's eyes, in a position of some peril should the wind begin to rise. Wondering if by any chance Mackworth was right in his

suspicious about the craft, he entered the house, and with little appetite, though he had not eaten since morning, sat down to make a meal.

It had grown quite dark before he finished, and drew his chair to the fire, to consider anew what action he could take. There was indeed so little that he could do, nothing at all, unless he could persuade Catherine to hear him. He thought of the parson. If he went to him and told him the terrible truth, he might refuse to perform the ceremony. But Peter Harland had said the man was a mouse—and Harland knew! Quite suddenly a way occurred to him.

“A letter!” he whispered. “Catherine will read—— If I write everything——”

A moment later he had rung the bell so violently that his housekeeper came at the run.

“Ink!” he cried. “A quill, paper and sealing-wax! And for the Lord’s sake, hurry!”

The woman furnished them quickly, and seating himself at the table, he began to write, choosing his words carefully, avoiding any vehemence of expression, but stating the truth coldly and starkly as he could. He had covered a couple of sheets, and his task was more than half-completed when a sound from outside caught his attention. He cocked his head to listen, and caught the sound again—the clashing hoofs of horses furiously ridden. Amazed, he jumped to his feet, and ran from the room to the hall to discover who came in such haste.

His housekeeper, hearing the noise, appeared at the same moment, and as there came a wild rapping on the door, she looked at him with scared eyes, doubtful what to do. Sir Harry himself ran to the door, and flinging it open, stared into the darkness. A gust of wind rushing in shook the flames of the candles, almost extinguishing them so that he saw nothing save the dim outline of a man with a horse standing behind him, and behind them two horsemen still mounted. In the same second a pistol was thrust into his face, and a hoarse voice quivering with fury demanded:



"You cursed abductor! What have you done with her?"

He recognized the voice, and a great fear shook him at the implication of the words. Then the candles recovered, and by their light he saw Roger Passmore's face, twisted with rage, his sombre eyes blazing.

"In God's name!" he cried apprehensively. "What do you mean?"

"Mean?" Passmore almost bellowed. "What have you done with Catherine? Where is she? Speak, man, or I'll scatter your brains!"

The housekeeper gave a scream of fear at the savage threat, and two maids came running from the rear of the house, who also screamed at the sight of the pistol thrust in their master's face. He turned on them swiftly.

"Quiet, you fools!" then fronted Passmore again. "Man," he said, "I know nothing. I have not seen Catherine since——"

"Liar!" cried the other distraughtly. "Do you think you can fob me with a child's tale? Where is she? Speak, or——"

A little jab of the pistol finished the threat, but Sir Harry never even noticed it. A fear beyond anything that a pistol in the hand of a raging man could provoke was gripping his heart. Some ill had overtaken Catherine. He must learn the truth, and to do that he must keep a hold on himself and suffer any provocation from this furious man.

"Passmore," he answered quietly in a tone that drove conviction into the other's mind, "I do not know anything of what you speak. I have not seen Catherine since I left Wyke House. What has happened? Tell me, man! Quick, that I may help you to find her."

Roger Passmore dropped the pistol.

"She's gone!" he cried, "and none knows where!"

"Went out of the house at dusk, sir," explained one of the men behind, "her having been with the old Squire for hours. She was walkin' on the terrace, taking the air. Two of us saw her—and now she's gone—clean as a whistle."

"Have you searched the garden?"

"Combed every bush," answered the man. "Also the stables an' the barn. She's gone without sign or sound."

"The town?" asked Sir Harry sharply. "Have you been——"

"No!" broke in Passmore. "There was nothing to take her there. I was sure we should find her here—that you——"

"Man, she would never come! Her loyalty to your father would not let her. But, in God's name, where can she be?"

"She never passed the gates. That much we know," cried Passmore hoarsely. "I have a man watching there and he must have seen her. Something beyond ordinary has befallen. She never meant to go beyond the terrace, for she'd but a cloak thrown over her shoulders, and she'd left me to watch by my father whilst she took the air. These men watching saw her moving towards the corner of the house, but neither of them remembers seeing her return."

"Did they hear anything? A cry? A scuffle?"

"Nothing!"

"Was there anyone suspicious about? Those rascals who——"

"None were observed! The thing is a mystery, and what to do, where to look now that she is not here, I do not know. I was sure we should find her with you."

"Those men who seek you—that blackamoor——" began Sir Harry tentatively.

"God knows!" whispered Passmore hoarsely. "They're capable of it. But where are they? There hasn't been a sign of them to-day."

He was mistaken there, but Sir Harry did not tell him so. Crushing down his apprehension, he strove to think, calmly, clearly. To tell Passmore what he knew would be of little use, since in his present state he would inevitably express himself in violent action which, where Catherine was concerned, might do untold harm. Already he himself had formed the conviction that Catherine had been kidnapped, and that Passmore shared that conviction

was evident. He thought of the lugger out in the Bay—if, as was possible, Catherine had been conveyed there, in case of hostile action in which the rovers got the worse, they would retreat to the sea, and the girl might be lost to the ken of her friends for ever. In an instant his mind was made up. He would keep his knowledge private, and whilst the other spent himself in violent search, seek to get in touch with the rovers, and obtain Catherine's release. He would ransom her, pay any price——

"They would be secret," he said, seeing the other watching him. "If they contemplated a kidnapping, they would not move openly, but lie furtive waiting their chance. But inquiries in the town may reveal something. Peter Harland had an odd guest who rode away this morning——"

"Body of God! The man who was asking questions at the gates! But he was not of that crew. He was too much the fine gentleman from John Storm's description——"

"You should be a better judge of that than most," answered Sir Harry.

"It might be——" the other began impetuously, and then broke off. "I'll see Peter Harland. He may have news. But, by heaven, if I find those who have taken her, it shall go hard with them!"

Without another word he mounted his horse, and turning, spurred towards the gates, followed by the others.

"God deliver us!" said Mrs. Braviner piously. "Yon's a dark whirlwind of a man."

Sir Harry wasted no time. Within fifteen minutes he was mounted and following in the wake of the three men who had come and gone with such haste; but when he passed the gates, he did not take the road to Bay Town, but swung aside, making for the valley above which stood the deserted farm. To seaward there was a slight mist, but overhead the stars were clear, and save for an occasional eddy of wind the night was still.

The first part of his ride was plain going, but in the darkness among the bushes in the valley it was not so

easy, being indeed so difficult that he was forced to dismount and, leading his horse, make his way by the sound of the stream bawling at the bottom. He passed it and began the ascent, searching for the gap between the hazels which gave on to the field where he had seen Tortuga and the other rover in the afternoon. In the darkness he could not find it, and since no other practicable opening offered, was forced to follow the pack-horse way right to the top of the hill, where he found a rough grass-grown road, between dilapidated walls of loose stone leading towards the house he sought, and which, a little below, was now dimly visible in the starlight.

He turned towards it, picking his way cautiously among the loose stones fallen from the walls which littered the road, and over which several times his horse stumbled, once nearly throwing him from the saddle. The walls ended suddenly in a pasture in which the derelict homestead was situated, and he saw it before him, dark, forbidding, not a glint of light showing, apparently left to the ghosts that by repute had their abode there.

For a moment, as he pulled up his horse, he was smitten by a fear that either he was too late, or had made a mistake in supposing this place to have been the sanctuary of the men he sought. But the next moment brought reassurance, for out of the darkness a little beyond the house wall came the sound of a man whistling some catch, and whilst he listened the unseen man changed his whistle to vocal melody.

“—And a hey-nonni-no ! for the maid’s red lips !”

His heart leaped at the words. He remembered that he had heard them on Passmore’s lips when the man was slack with liquor on Christmas Eve. He knew now that he had not made a mistake. Here the men whom he had seen at “The Flask” had found a new domicile. He stared in the direction whence the sound came, and as he did so, there came to him the tones of an impatient voice.

“Stow that, ye lubber, an’ hurry with the shavings.”

"Tortuga!" he whispered, and felt a surprisingly glad leap of his heart at the nearness of that ruthless man.

Other voices reached him. There were several of them out there in the darkness—three or four at least as he judged. What were they doing? He could not guess, but as he sat there an idea came to him, and he turned swiftly in the direction of that dark and shuttered house. If Catherine were within, then whilst these kidnappers were busy outside, it might be possible for him to steal to her and bring her forth. A moment later, however, he dismissed the idea. He did not know how many men might be left within, and if he were caught entering the house by stealth, it was likely that his end would be swift. His original plan of bargaining with the rovers openly was the best after all.

"The tinder-box, Tod."

Tortuga's voice again. It seemed that they were about to kindle a fire. But why a fire in the open, when as he remembered from his observations of the afternoon they had a fire in the house. He was puzzled for a moment, then the explanation broke upon him:

"A signal fire."

Those men in the darkness were about to signal to the lugger out in the Bay. His eyes stared into that farther darkness but saw nothing—probably the craft was riding without lights. It was, he thought, necessary that he should act quickly, and he clucked his horse forward. Voices guided him, and gave him information.

"A quare thing, Duncan, that the Nabob should be set on this li'l doxy. I've never known him to look the way of a petticoat before."

"'Tisn't the doxy! 'Tis Lucifer he wants. The maid's no more than bait for the trap."

He was momentarily jubilant at the news conveyed. He had been right after all. Catherine was here, and it seemed that he was in time.

A tiny shower of sparks showed in the darkness a dozen yards away, and a moment later he saw the head of a man faintly outlined as he blew upon the tinder.



"Where's the match, Tod?"

A little odour of burning sulphur came to him as the sulphur-dipped stick was applied to the tinder; and then, shielding the match with his hand, one of the men stooped and applied it to a combustible heap, which caught immediately, sending up a bright flame. Now he saw four men standing there, their backs to him, whilst they stared at the dark void that was the sea. They were so absorbed in their watch, that had it suited his purpose he might have ridden them down, and had he been assured that they were alone and that there were no other men in the house to sally forth at the first alarm, he would have done so. As it was, he refrained, and did not even draw his pistol from the holster.

"Good evening, gentlemen."

At his greeting, each of the four watchers leaped as if he had been pricked with a sword. One started to run towards the house crying to someone there, but two, with amazing readiness, flung themselves at his horse's head, whilst the third, who was Tortuga, whipped a pistol from his belt and levelled it swiftly.

"Don't fire, Tortuga," he counselled gently. "It won't pay you."

With a sharp oath, Tortuga pressed nearer, and the flame of the beacon leaping up lit Sir Harry's face clearly. He saw recognition leap into the rover's eyes, and then the man gave a shout of utter amazement:

"Ten million devils!"

## CHAPTER XXII

### A RIFLED TOMB

AS Tortuga gave his shout of surprise, all the men about the fire simultaneously closed upon Sir Harry, who sat quite still, desiring to avoid precipitating any extreme action against himself. One of them was at his horse's head in a twinkling, another

standing at the stirrup pointed a pistol at him, whilst a third with drawn cutlass took up his station at the other side. Their unprepossessing faces seen in the firelight had dark looks, and it was clear to him that they took him for a spy and that he was within an ace of death.

But with the element of surprise to help him, he began at once to speak, quietly and firmly.

"A little surprise for you, Tortuga. You didn't expect me, I know. Take me to the Nabob."

"The Nabob!" Tortuga's surprise was doubled. For a moment after shouting the two words he was dumb, then he shouted again. "Blazes! What d'ye want with him?"

"To propose a little bargain."

"Well, ye can't. He isn't here."

Sir Harry found that a blow. In making his rash venture alone he had counted on finding someone in authority to whom he could make his offer, and he knew that the absence of the man whom he had named increased his own peril. But he gave no sign of the knowledge as he replied easily.

"That is a pity. I wanted to propose a ransom for that girl whom you have kidnapped."

"Perdition!" shouted the man. "How did ye know that she was here?"

"How did I know that any of you were here, Tortuga?"

"A cursed spy, Tortuga," cried the man with the pistol. "Shall I let daylight into him?"

"If you've any sense, my man, you'll put that pistol away. It might go off by accident and a shot as likely as not will bring men whom you don't want this way. And that fire of yours is shouting for trouble. The Revenue officer is interested in that lugger out there——"

"The devil!" interrupted Tortuga. "Is there nothing secret from ye, man?"

"Well, the lugger isn't exactly a needle in a haystack!" said Sir Harry. He looked towards the darkness of the sea as he spoke, and gave a quick laugh as he caught sight

of a flare burning far out. "There's her signal to you, if I am not mistaken."

The men turned swiftly to mark the flare, and Sir Harry continued:

"This is a smuggling district. Every riding-officer on the coast will mark that flare, and if your fire is noticed——"

"Scatter the d——d thing, two of ye!" commanded Tortuga, and in a moment two of them had kicked the fire abroad and were treading on the brands.

The flare at sea died out. In the darkness that followed the scattering of the fire, Tortuga's face was a mere splotch, so that Sir Harry was unable to read the man's thoughts; but a moment later he had some indication what they were.

"In Heaven's name, what am I to do with ye, man?"

"Nothing, I hope," answered Sir Harry genially. "Your native wit should tell you that if I'd meant harm to you, I should not have ridden here alone. My only interest is that girl whom you kidnapped——"

"That's the Nabob's business," broke in the man.

"Maybe! But the ransom will be yours, I think."

"Ransom!" cried one of the others. "You're willing to pay?"

"Heavily," answered Sir Harry quickly. "Take me in the house and let us talk."

"Aye, Tortuga. There's sense there. A bird in hand is worth a flock in the air. Into the house with the man. Before morning the lugger'll be standin' in, an' we'll have to quit. There's no sense in going with empty fists."

"Would ye say that to the Nabob?" growled Tortuga.

"To the Nabob or any other of the crew. We're free, aren't we? Since when did gentlemen of fortune give up their right of equal speech? Into the house, say I. You're quartermaster by free election, an' you've got as much right as the Nabob to say what shall be done. Into the house! We can hear what this swab has to say."

A chorus of approving growls showed that the man had the support of his fellows, and after a moment Tortuga spoke.

" 'Tis not my wish. I'm with the Nabob——"

" An' where's he ? " asked a jeering voice. " Here one minute an' gone the next, leaving us to meet the riding-officers this lubber talks of, if they should come. I'm for the talk-over. It's sound sense."

Tortuga permitted himself to be persuaded.

" Get off the horse," he said to Sir Harry. " But make a move to quit or lift a hand to strike, an' I'll shoot ye like a dog."

" Don't get jumpy, Tortuga. Should I have come if I had not meant to deal straight ? "

Sir Harry dismounted from his horse as he spoke. One of the rovers instantly took charge of it, and the rest in a bunch with the prisoner in the midst of them walked to the house. One of them thrust the creaking door open, and Tortuga with a drawn cutlass shepherded Sir Harry into a room, where three men were squatted on the floor playing cards, whilst two more were at the dice-box. He looked round swiftly, and on a decrepit settle which had been a fixture in the house, saw Catherine, her hands bound with a length of rope, part of which was fastened to the settle.

Her face was very pale ; there was melancholy in her bearing, deep trouble in her eyes, which, however, lit with sudden hope as they saw Sir Harry. A second later the look of hope gave way to one of acute apprehension as she realized that, like herself, he was a prisoner ; and without speaking he gave her a reassuring glance and then he faced Tortuga, whose countenance in the candlelight had a dark, forbidding look.

" I don't know what you want with that lady," he said, " but you are inviting trouble for yourselves by what you have done. Already the hue and cry is out for her, and when it is known in Bay Town that you——"

" Stow that ! " broke in the man. " Ye came here to offer ransom——"

" And that's true ! " interrupted Sir Harry. " This lady can be of no interest to you and I am willing to pay you handsomely for her enlargement—a hundred—no, two hundred guineas ! "

"Money down?" snapped one of the men.

"Payable to-morrow. One doesn't keep——"

A burst of contemptuous laughter broke on the words.

"No!" said Tortuga. "An' we don't deal on trust! An' for me, guineas won't buy that girl without the Nabob's word. But if ye could offer us what we want, an' that's the Golden Paycock, why I'd make it an exchange."

He laughed as he finished speaking, but the laughter died on his lips as he caught the look on Sir Harry's face; then he cried out excitedly: "By Heaven, man, ye know—ye know!"

Sir Harry did not immediately reply. There was a strange expression on his face; his eyes had a look of absorption—the look of a man who was seeing again in revealing light things that had already happened, and connecting what had been no more than isolated events into a coherent whole. And that was the very fact. Whilst he stood there, absorbed, he was listening to the sound of furtive steps passing his chamber door at Wyke at something after two on Christmas morning; watching a solitary figure moving across the snow, bearing some heavy burden; and staring again into Passmore's empty chamber to assure himself that it was he who had gone forth. Then, with lightning swiftness, his thought leaped to the churchyard and to the newly-mortared slab which the man who had struck the sexton over the head had been at such pains to disguise; and again in the full light of the morning he watched a rider descend the steep road from Wyke in the direction of the church. Then Tortuga's voice, speaking again, hoarse with tremendous excitement, broke through his absorption.

"Ye know, man? By God—ye know!"

He took a deep breath, laughed sharply, and answered tensely.

"Yes, by God, I know!"

Tortuga's answer was as swift as the movement of a cutlass could be. With weapon raised to strike, he fairly bellowed:

"Then, out with it, quick, or by the Rood, I cut ye down!"



Sir Harry was not disturbed by the threat. He laughed softly, though his eyes danced with excitement.

"That's not the way, Tortuga! Have you never heard the fable of the man who killed the bird that laid the golden eggs? I came here to drive a bargain—but I change the terms of it. I offer you the Golden Peacock for the enlargement of the lady."

"To-morrow, I reckon," sneered the rover. His rough face worked with excitement, and there was a covetous light in his eyes.

"No. This very night. Within the hour."

The man whom he addressed lowered his cutlass and stood there biting his lips. The covetous light in his eyes grew. Then he broke out :

"If ye're playing with me——"

"Oh, I know! My life's the stake. Do you think I'm blind to that? But I take the risk. I know where the golden bird is. I will lead you to the place if you will let this lady go free."

"Ye will lead us, aye!" scoffed the man, "an' with the doxy gone, ye'll lead us to an empty nest."

Sir Harry laughed.

"You pay me a fine compliment, Tortuga. At least, as you must see, I shall be giving my life for the lady's freedom! But I am no Jew to drive too hard a bargain. I shall be content if the lady goes with us, and if she is freed when you have the thing you seek in your hands."

Tortuga considered. That he was inclined to the bargain, nay, eager for it, was clear; but as he stood there a doubt came on his face.

"If this is a trap that ye're leading us to——"

"I shall die first! I haven't a doubt of it, man. And I am dealing honestly, as I expect you to. No one knows I have come here, and it isn't in the least likely that there will be anyone at the place I shall take you to, and I'll go there bound if you wish it."

"Oh, ye'll do that, my friend," said the rover with a harsh laugh.

"Then it is a bargain!"

"Aye!" replied Tortuga, the covetous flame back in his eyes. "If ye deliver the Paycock, ye can take the maid. What say ye, my hearties?"

"Aye!" the word came in a chorus.

"An' if ye fail us or play any Judas tricks, then by the Prince of Hell ye shall go straight to him!" . . . He turned to the fellows about him. "Which of ye stops here in case the Nabob comes?"

It seemed there was no competition to play the part of watchman. In the eyes of all there was the covetous light that shone in Tortuga's, and all the men were in a ferment of excitement. There was a little noisy wrangling, a talk of drawing lots, and then one of them laughed harshly.

"If any man-jack of us stops here, Tort, it's yo'rself. D'ye reckon any of us will sit here whilst t'others carries away the jewel bird? Not we! It's all or none, an' ye know it well."

Apparently Tortuga did know it, for he wasted no further time in vain suggestions and all of them began to prepare for the road. When they were ready, coats belted, cutlasses and pistols in place, Sir Harry made a suggestion.

"The lady rides my horse?"

"No, she don't," said Tortuga with a vile oath.

"Then I don't stir a step."

"Fool, I'll prick ye every yard with a knife, if ye give trouble."

"The lady rides," replied Sir Harry firmly. "Why make a pother about it? We shall get there the quicker that way."

"What's the odds, Tort?" asked one of the rovers. "The gentleman will be tied, and one of us will be at the horse's head."

There was a little more wrangling, but in the end Sir Harry had his way, and when they started, two of them carrying lighted lanterns, Catherine rode the horse, whilst her lover walked ahead, between two men, each of whom carried a pistol ready for use. The men were noisy with

excitement and, remembering that Passmore and his men from the Bay were abroad looking for Catherine, Sir Harry gave a caution.

"It will be as well to move quietly, Tortuga. As I told you, the hue and cry is out for this lady. You don't want to bring half the town on you, as you surely will if we march with this racket about us."

Tortuga gave a sharp order. Immediately the men fell silent, the lanterns were doused, and thenceforward no man spoke in anything above a whisper. They swung forward through the darkness at a rattling pace, Sir Harry leading them by ways that would bring them out above the church, and without risk of encountering anyone at the head of the town. In a little over three-quarters of an hour they were descending the steep road with the church immediately beneath them, when Sir Harry gave a sharp exclamation.

"What's got ye?" asked Tortuga suspiciously.

"There is someone in the churchyard. I saw a lantern—— Ah, there, did you see?"

"What of it?" said the rover. "We'll chase him out of it fast enough. . . . Step it, my hearties."

They swung downward, Sir Harry watching for the lantern which he had seen flickering between the grave-stones, conscious of a very uneasy feeling at his heart. That light in the churchyard at such an hour had an ominous look. He watched keenly, but he did not see it again, and decided that the man who carried the lantern had either doused it or withdrawn altogether.

He had little time to reflect upon the matter. Within two minutes they were at the church gates, and one of the men was blowing on the tinder to light the lanterns. Everything was still, but the rovers were whispering hoarsely in their excitement, and when the lanterns were lit, Tortuga ordered Catherine off the horse, and tied the animal to the gate.

"Now, my gentleman," he said. "Lead on. Here's where ye die most convenient for burial, if ye've been lying."

Sir Harry led the way, slowly enough, for he wanted

time to think. He had an uncomfortable premonition of trouble ahead and very near at that. Not for one moment did he doubt the intuition that had come to him in the derelict farm-house, but the light he had seen flitting between the gravestones had kindled apprehensions in his heart. If any untoward thing had befallen, then he was sure to die, for in their rage and disappointment the men whose prisoner he was would be ruthless. In and out he went among the graves, wishing ardently that he could find some way of warning Catherine, but unable to devise any; and then in sheer desperation he took the turn which led him to the Passmore tomb.

He saw it lift before him, dark and solid, and came to a halt.

"In there," he said.

Tortuga lifted a lantern so that its light fell on the heavy slab which formed the top; then he swore in a hoarse whisper and asked:

"How the blazes are we going to get into it. We want tools——"

"No!" answered Sir Harry sharply. "There's a slab at the side, newly mortared last night. A knife will pick out the mortar and rest will be easy."

Tortuga fell to his knees to examine the side of the tomb.

"By the Lord, ye're right! 'Tis so! A knife, one of ye—quick!"

Someone handed him a dirk-like knife, and kneeling there he began to work.

"It's soft, soft as butter." He laughed in hoarse excitement. "I could scrape it with a thumb-nail."

Sir Harry bent forward, and then he knew that a terrific moment was preparing, for the mortar as he saw it in the light of the lantern was quite new, glistening a little as if wet, and there was on it none of the moss that he had seen the previous night. Someone had already rifled the ghostly cache—Passmore—or another—who, mattered little to him in that moment.

He straightened himself with a feeling of despair. Most

of the rovers crowded round Tortuga, almost dancing with covetous excitement. But one man with a pistol kept quite by him, close enough to frustrate any attempt to escape. Catherine herself moved forward, till she was at his shoulder.

"The thing they seek? It is there?" she whispered almost in his ear.

"No!" he whispered back. "It was, but it is gone. Get ready to run when the trouble begins."

He caught a gasping sob, and half turned to look at her. In the light of the lanterns he saw her eyes brimming with apprehension for him, and even in that moment's strain felt his heart leap. Then he whispered again:

"The horse! Make for it. Don't mind me. I'll pull out of this—yet."

He spoke to give her confidence; but in himself he had little hope. He watched Tortuga working with desperate speed to loosen the slab, so desperately that he snapped the knife, and shouted for another. It was given to him, and he fell to work again, the watchers fairly bubbling with excitement. The man in charge of him gripped his arm and dragged him nearer the tomb. Then Tortuga gave a cheerful curse, and the slab dropped from its place to the turf.

"A lantern."

He took it as it was thrust into his hands, and in the light Sir Harry saw his evil face shining with sweat, his eyes glowing with cupidity. He leaned forward, the lantern disappeared in the tomb, half the man's body followed it. A quarter of a minute passed, then came the sound of a rumbling oath, and Sir Harry looked over his shoulder and nodded to the girl. Two seconds later the man and the lantern reappeared. Tortuga rose swiftly to his feet, thrust his way between two men and lifted the lantern so that its light fell on his prisoner's face. It lit his own also and showed it working with terrific rage. Then he broke out ferociously.

"Now, ye —— liar, ye shall die as a sheep dies at the shambles."



## CHAPTER XXIII

## IN THE BEDMAN'S HOUSE

THERE was a sudden hoarse growl from the other rovers, who grouped themselves about Sir Harry menacingly. Then one of them inquired brusquely :

"Not there, Tortuga?"

"No! Nor never was. This Ananias has sold us. But we'll give him the last lesson he'll ever know this side of purgatory. My stars! That he should dare——"

"It was there when we came down the hill," broke in Sir Harry sharply. "There was someone here. Recall the lantern we saw, Tortuga? The thing has been gone not more than ten minutes."

"But where?" demanded Tortuga. "Answer me that, my Solomon."

"Aye," growled the others, like wolves deprived of their prey. "Answer!"

Sir Harry made no immediate attempt to do so. Though the men about him did not guess it, he was listening more keenly than ever he had listened in his life. And whilst he stood there with the disappointed rovers surging about him, the light of the lanterns flashing on knife-blade and pistol, he caught the sound for which he waited—the clash of hoofs on the downhill road. Catherine was free then, and riding for her life—perhaps for his life. He gave a sudden, sharp laugh, which stung Tortuga to new blasphemy, in the midst of which the man Duncan suddenly remembered the girl.

"By the Mass! That doxy, she's gone!"

"Run to the gate!"

Some of the men hurried away, and returned with the news that the horse was gone as well as the maid, and that moved Tortuga to a very torrent of oaths, at the end of which he swung with levelled pistol towards Sir Harry.

"Ye've thrown crooked dice, my gentleman. But now ye pay the stake. 'My life,' says ye a little while back, an', by stars, that's what ye'll pay!"

Sir Harry said nothing, but with the lantern shining full on his face he stared across the darkness of the churchyard, thinking of that other lantern he had seen flitting among the graves. Whose hand had carried that? Roger Passmore's? He could not believe it. The man, distraught by the disappearance of Catherine, was not likely to turn aside from his search in order to remove something that he believed was safely hidden. Then who? He stared about him in the darkness, and as he did so saw a lighted window a little distance away, with the shadow of a man's head on the drawn white curtain. Whilst he watched, the position of the light was changed; the shadow took a different angle and the corner of the curtain was drawn aside ever so narrowly, and suddenly he found himself remembering how in the morning he had seen that same curtain shaking whilst the man behind it had watched him in the churchyard.

As he thought of that earlier looking-forth, for the second time that night an intuition of the truth came to him.

"By all the saints!" he cried hoarsely. "The sexton!"

"What's that ye say?" demanded Tortuga. "The sexton? Ye'll need him in exactly three minutes——"

"That is his house there," broke in Sir Harry. "He surprised Passmore hiding what you seek last night, and suffered a crack on the head; and this morning he was watching from behind the curtains when I was examining that tombstone. That is the truth, and I should not wonder if the man has let his curiosity bring him to a fortune."

"By the Mass! that's likely enough!" cried Tortuga, staring at the sexton's window.

"None other could have an inkling of the truth——"

"Perdition! if the swab has it! . . . But proof is easy!" said the rover with a savage laugh. "Come, my hearties, and bring this liar along. If he's right, we'll have the Paycock yet. That house is solitary. We'll burn it above the owner's head an' roast him in it, but we'll know the truth."

He began to move recklessly across the churchyard, stumbling often, followed by the others, two of whom dragged Sir Harry with them. They reached a wall, climbed it, and dropped into the road at the farther side across which stood the cottage for which they were making. The sounds they made must have reached the sexton, for the light was suddenly doused, and Tortuga gave a sharp order :

" Quick, Tod and Duncan round to the back. The rest of ye to the front."

The two men moved silently and swiftly to the back of the cottage, whilst the others took up their position in front. For a moment Tortuga stood listening ; then he rapped on the door sharply with a pistol-butt. There was no response. He tried the latch and put a shoulder to the door—without result. Then with a curse he moved to the window and drove the pistol-butt through a couple of panes, and through one of them he thrust the pistol and fired. The report filled the night with sound, and the flash revealed the room to be empty, but as the reverberation died away, Sir Harry thought he caught the sound of a door cautiously opened. Then from the rear of the house came a sharp laugh and Tod's voice :

" Well, my hearty ! "

There followed the sounds of struggle quickly ended, and of a man's whimpering voice ; then Duncan shouted :

" Got the lubber trussed, Tort."

" This way," said Tortuga ; and the whole party hurried to the rear of the cottage. By the light of the lantern which one of the men held up, the better to view their new prisoner, Sir Harry saw the sexton, his arms bound tight to his sides with a belt, his face working in the extremity of fear.

" Inside ! " said Tortuga laconically.

He led the way, the two men thrusting the frightened sexton after him, and the men in charge of Sir Harry bringing up the rear. They made their way to the living-room, the window of which had been smashed, and which reeked of burnt powder.

"Draw the curtains, one of ye."

One of the rovers did so; then their quartermaster pointed to a couple of candles on the mantelpiece.

"Light them."

The candles were lit; the lantern set upon the table, then Tortuga seated himself in a ladder-backed arm-chair.

"Put the swab there!"

The scared sexton was placed a yard or so in front of the man who gave the order; then, quite deliberately, without a word, Tortuga began to recharge the pistol which he had fired, the sexton watching him with fearful eyes. When the operation was finished, Tortuga cocked the pistol, held it in front of him, the muzzle in a direct line for the sexton's heart, and asked casually:

"Where is it?"

"W-w-where is—is w-what?" answered the sexton, though his eyes betrayed to Sir Harry that he understood quite well the bearing of the question.

Tortuga's answer was quiet enough in tone, but brutal in effect.

"Singe his whiskers, Duncan. Two of ye hold him!"

Two of the rovers gripped the man's shoulders, and Duncan, taking one of the candles, fulfilled the quartermaster's brutal order literally. The sexton writhed and screamed with pain, and one of the men who held him put a callous hand over his mouth to check the sound; then Tortuga spoke again:

"That's a little taste of Hell for ye, my man! Next thing will be a strip of skin cut off ye—an' by the Powers, I'll flay ye if ye don't own up quick! Where is it?"

The sexton's face took a stubborn look. Possibly he did not believe that his captors would proceed to further extremes, or maybe he was prepared to endure further suffering to keep what he had found.

"If I knew what yo' were talking about——" he began, in an unsteady but truculent voice.

"The knife, Tod," broke in the quartermaster. "The upper arm to start with. Three inches or so."

"God!" screamed the sexton, "yo' won't——"

"Tear away the sleeve, Duncan."

The sexton looked at Sir Harry and cried appealingly.

"They won't—— Yo' won't stand by, Sir Harry, while they rip——"

"I can't help myself, sexton. If you know what they want, I counsel you to speak."

"But—but——"

The man, it seemed, still clung to the idea that he might escape with his life and hold from the rovers what they sought, and Sir Harry, knowing the vanity of that hope, spoke sharply to him.

"Don't be a fool, man! Can't you see that you'll have to speak—or die?"

The sexton's jaw set stubbornly, but as Duncan ripped the upper part of his coat-sleeve with a knife, and then tore a strip from the shirt, leaving his upper arm partly naked, he visibly blanched. Then as Tod approached him with the naked steel he cried out:

"No! No!"

"Quick, Tod! There's no time to waste."

At that the sexton's nerves failed him.

"In the chimney!" he cried shiveringly. "It's in the chimney."

Tortuga gave a grim laugh.

"One of ye take a candle and look."

It was the man Hornygold, who had been with Lucifer on the *Black Adventure*, who seized the candle and stepped to the open fireplace, scattering the smouldering brands. Half of him disappeared in the recesses of the chimney, and for a moment there was a tense silence, though to Sir Harry it was clear that the rovers were boiling with excitement.

"I can't see it, Tort!" came a muffled voice from the chimney. "That grave-diggin' swab is lying."

"No!" screamed the sexton. "There's a kind o' shelf to the right. It's far back in the soot. If yo'll grope——"

There was a sudden shout of exultation from the chimney, an avalanche of soot, amid which the candle fell to the hearth; then Hornygold, coughing and all



grimy with soot, appeared holding something in his arms. There was a little surge forward on the part of his fellows ; but Tortuga shouted peremptorily :

“ Stand—there ! . . . Have ye got it, Horny ? ”

“ Sure ! Here's the bird of gold.”

“ Set it on the table.”

For a moment Hornygold stood blowing the soot from the thing in his arms ; then he obeyed the quartermaster, and set on the table a wonderful thing—a peacock of gold, tail expanded and the whole of it—neck, body and the great fan of the tail—so encrusted with sapphires, rubies, pearls and other gems, as to reproduce the hues of life. Sir Harry caught his breath as he saw it glowing in the candlelight, whilst an excited roar of wonder broke from the rovers. Then Tortuga spoke.

“ We've got the prize, my hearties ! And it's time we were quitting. That girl may have gone to bring help for her fancy man—and the boat'll be waiting for us.”

“ But the Nabob, Tortuga ? How about——”

“ He'll look after himself ”

“ An' Black Tom ? ” cried another.

Then a leer came on Tortuga's face, and he dropped a slow wink.

“ How many more do ye want to help to pluck the Paycock there ? There's a fortune apiece for us—lashings of guineas—in that bird——”

He broke off, to let the significance of his words sink into the slower minds of his fellows, and Sir Harry saw cupidity quicken in their eyes as they stared at the flaming wonder on the table. The men began to talk simultaneously, shouting approbation of Tortuga's suggestion, and in the very midst of the uproar, Sir Harry, who had been thrust towards the window, caught a sound which made his heart leap—the sound of stirrup against scabbard-steel.

Then events followed with amazing quickness. An arm was thrust through the broken window, to drag the curtain aside, a pistol followed and there came a thundering sound on the door, in the midst of which a stentorian voice shouted :

“ Open—in the King’s name ! ”

Mackworth ! Scarcely had the name leaped to Sir Harry’s mind when Tortuga acted.

“ Douse the glim ! ” he roared, and himself knocked the candle from the mantelpiece, whilst Hornygold drove a fist at the lantern, and in the darkness whispered hoarsely : “ I’ve got the bird. The rear way out. Close round me—an’ use pistols, knives. Now ! ”

The thundering on the outer door continued. The pistol thrust in the window was fired at random, and one of the rovers shouted a curse as the ball found him ; then from the rear came a shout.

“ Huzza ! my hearties ! ”

There was a din of exploding weapons, a clash of steel on steel, a horse screamed with pain, voices shouted vociferously, and the sound of rushing feet and crashing hoofs mingled on the road outside.

The first clashing onset was over in a moment. The noises moved farther away, odd pistol-shots sounded, once a voice roaring orders reached the two men in the cottage, and then a hoarse hail :

“ Ahoy, Tort ! ”

“ Ahoy ! ” came the answering voice, then again the rush of pursuit, in the midst of which Sir Harry heard a horse move round the house.

He waited, listening, and in the darkness the sexton moaned to himself.

“ A fortin ! A fortin ! Lost ! ”

“ Quiet, fool ! ” said Sir Harry. “ Listen ! There’s someone about.” Scarcely had he spoken when through the night there came a new sound—the boom of a gun.

“ That’s from the sea,” cried the sexton. “ A signal to them murdering rascals, belike.”

Sir Harry, remembering the lugger, thought that was very likely, but for the moment was more interested in the sounds nearer at hand.

“ Listen ! ” he commanded again irritably.

Once more he caught the sound of hoofs, then there

came a rapping on the rear door which, from the draught blowing in, must have been standing open.

"S-s-s-h!" he whispered to the sexton, and waited breathlessly for what was to follow.

The tread of light feet, a stumble, a man's groaning curse, and a little startled cry sounded simultaneously. Then Sir Harry cried out:

"Catherine!"

"Oh, thank God! Thank God!"

Her answering cry, quivering with relief, brought to him a great uplift. Bound as he was, he began to move forward in the direction whence came the light, uncertain steps.

"My dear!" he whispered through the darkness. "My dear!"

But before they met there was an intervention. Once more hoofs clashed on the stones at the rear of the cottage, and then came Roger Passmore's voice, hoarse and tense with anxiety:

"Catherine! Catherine! Are you here?"

## CHAPTER XXIV

### LUCIFER'S BARGAIN

FOR a moment the girl did not reply and the brief silence was broken by a groan from the man who lay somewhere between the girl and the door, and at the sound Passmore cried out sharply:

"Who is that?"

Then Catherine replied: "An injured man, I think——"

"Ah, you're there." There was an accent of relief in the speaker's voice. "I was afraid those hounds had got you again. Why did you come here?"

"To find Sir Harry, who——"

Something very like an oath broke on the words, and Sir Harry himself intervened.

"There are two of us here, Passmore, both of us unable to use our arms, which are bound. If you will come forward and release us, we may be of use.

Passmore began to move forward, stumbled as the girl had done against the man lying in the way, and gave sharp expression to his feelings. In the same second Catherine herself moved forward, and as she entered the room, by the very dim light of the scattered embers, saw Sir Harry standing just within the door.

"You are unhurt?" she asked in a hurried whisper. "You are quite unhurt?"

"Not so much as a scratch," he laughed. "But my arms are painful. If you could procure a light——"

"Candle's by the hearth," broke in the sexton. "Yo' can see it there."

The girl moved quickly in the direction indicated, found the candle, picked up a glowing stick, blew on it, and had just succeeded in lighting the candle when Roger Passmore appeared. As he looked at the scene there was a dark, frowning expression on his face, and as his eyes fell on the sexton's singed and blistered face he asked sharply:

"What's the meaning of this?"

"Those demons singed me with the candle, sir," cried the sexton for himself.

"Why?"

The question reduced the sexton to silence, and as his eyes fell guiltily before the other's frowning stare, on Passmore's face came a swift look of suspicion.

"Why?" he asked again. "Why should they cruelly singe you who are a stranger to them? . . . Answer me, man!"

The sexton shuffled his feet unhappily, and Sir Harry answered for him.

"If you must know, Passmore, it was to make him reveal the whereabouts of the thing you had hidden in the tomb in the churchyard——"

"Powers of Darkness! They got it?"

The words came in a shout. For one moment there

was a raging look on the man's face ; then it was displaced by a swift look of apprehension.

" Yes," answered Sir Harry. " They got it."

" But in Heaven's name——"

He swung round on the sexton, his eyes flaming, his spirit raging.

" It was you, you cursed spy ! You were in the churchyard watching, and——"

His rage choked his utterance, and unable to speak, he struck. The sexton measured his length, howling, under the ferocious blow, and as Passmore stepped forward with a positively murderous look upon his face, the girl ran between him and the fallen man.

" Roger," she said quietly, " you are forgetting my presence !"

" No !" he shouted. " My God ! if you knew what this fool has done——"

" Perhaps I do—a little. But there is no excuse for striking a man whose arms are bound."

" I could kill the man !" he fumed. " You don't know. You can't understand, Catherine ! This spy has put my life in jeopardy——"

" As his own was and as Sir Harry's was until a few minutes ago."

There was a little touch of scorn in her voice as she turned from him, and moving to Sir Harry began to undo the ropes that bound him. Passmore watched her without offering to help. There was a brooding look on his face, and as from outside there came the sound of steps for one moment a light of fear flickered in his eyes, and his hand went to the pistol in his belt. The steps passed on, and the flicker of fear died away, but the brooding look remained ; and Sir Harry, watching him, knew that the man really believed that the loss of the Golden Peacock had added to the peril in which he moved.

As his bonds fell away, Sir Harry stepped to the sexton, who was unable to rise of himself, and swung him to his feet and unfastened the belt which held his arms to his side. The sexton instantly backed to the farthest corner



of the room, and by that very action drew the attention of the brooding man to himself.

"How did you find out——" began Passmore, and stopped at a sound behind him, a scraping, crawling sound, which made him swing round, the light of fear back in his eyes.

A man's head and shoulders appeared in the doorway, low down, and whilst the owner still crawled forward, dragging a useless leg behind him, Sir Harry recognized the man Hornygold. That Passmore recognized him also was clear from the startled look upon his face, and that the recognition was mutual the wounded man's shout made clear.

"Lucifer! By the Powers!"

Roger Passmore visibly flinched at the words, and for a moment was dumb. Then a savage light came in his eyes, and he laughed sneeringly.

"I don't know what you mean, rascal, but you're for the gallows!"

"By ——, no! Cap'n! Yo're forgetting we was shipmates——"

"Never with scum like you!" cried Passmore in bold denial.

"In the *Black Adventure*," went on Hornygold, as if the other had not spoken. "I was quartermaster an' yo' was Cap'n. . . . An' there's a fine tale to tell in court if yo' let the officers take me. Can't yo' see the folk a-starin' an' gapin' an' the beak a-scratchin' his wig when I unwinds the tale? Do yo' reckon they'll hang a poor devil of a sailor-man what's turned King's evidence to put the darbies on Cap'n Lucifer of——"

"D—— you! Hold your lying tongue, rascal!" roared Passmore.

"Then yo'll get me out of this, Cap'n, hey? Yo' won't leave an old shipmate in the lurch? Yes an' no! says yo'? Well, 'tis what I'd expect of——"

Passmore looked round a little helplessly. There was a desperate look in his eyes. Had he been alone, Sir Harry thought to himself, Hornygold's end would have

been swift and sudden. As it was, he was plainly in some quandary how to act, and there was none there to help him. He stood for a moment gnawing his lip ; then he swung round to the sexton, ignoring alike Sir Harry and the girl.

"Man," he asked, "you can be secret?"

"N—no!" stammered the sexton, shrinking back.

"For a hundred guineas—and nothing said of the thing you stole."

The sexton's face flushed covetously. "I might!"

"Then get this man to your bed—for an hour, two hours at most. . . . I'll help you to carry him. Quick! Those riding-officers may return."

A little grin came on the rover's face.

"I'm trustin' yo', Cap'n! An' as for this sheep, if he bleats I'll wring his neck. Go steady, as yo' lift me. There's a bullet in my leg."

Passmore said nothing in reply. He turned to Sir Harry. His face had a haunted look, but his manner was light.

"I wonder if you would hold the candle to an illegal act, Sir Harry."

The man he addressed made no reply, but picked up the candle. For Hornygold he cared nothing ; Passmore he held in utter loathing, but Catherine's eyes were on him, full of beseeching, and for her sake he was willing to help to save both men from the gallows, for now, as he was sure, there could be no marriage between her and Roger Passmore. Even her loyal gratitude to the dying man at Wyke House would not be proof against the revelation of Passmore's villainy which had been made in her presence.

Groaning and cursing, the rover was carried to the room above, and his injured leg tightly bandaged, and that done, Passmore spoke.

"Before morning, when things are quiet, I will come for you with a coach."

"Aye! Aye! Cap'n! Allus the thoughtful one, yo' was. An' we'll take this gentleman along with us for company——"

"No!" broke in Sir Harry sharply. "I hold the candle, but I do not sit at the game."

"Then it'll have to be this sheep of a grave-digger; for I'll be keel-hauled before I goes alone." A slow grin came on the man's evil face. "Lor' knows I might fall asleep in the coach . . . an' never wake no more——"

"There shall be company," said Passmore in a desperate voice. "The sexton or another."

"An' you'll take me down to the old place at——"

"To safety," snapped Passmore, and turning, stumbled down the rickety stairs.

Sir Harry waited for the sexton to light a second candle from the one he held, then he himself followed. As he entered the kitchen he saw Catherine across the room, very pale of face, with a distraught look in her blue eyes, whilst Passmore was by the door, frowning darkly and staring straight in front of him. He did not so much as look at his rival, but broke the silence suddenly in a hoarse voice:

"Catherine, my father was calling for you three hours back, and fretting that you did not come. I doubt that by this——"

"Oh, I must go to him," whispered the girl sharply. "I must go at once, with speed," She turned to Sir Harry. "Your horse, may I borrow him? He is outside."

"Of course!"

"It shall be returned at once," said Passmore.

"No! I will fetch it. There is something I must say to Catherine."

The other frowned. "The present time is perhaps the most opportune. My cousin will be very busy until Saturday——"

"My God!" cried Sir Harry. "You will go on with that after what has transpired? . . . But you shall not. I swear you shall not! It would be infamous, man!"

"Appearances mislead," said Passmore, with astonishing self-possession. "You must not think too much of what that man said. My cousin already has the explanation of——"

"That lie of your being pressed into the rovers' service? But Hornygold knows better. He gave you a name—a title——"

"An easy thing for a rascal to do! What of it? There is no proof. Catherine will not believe a scoundrelly dog like——"

"But Mackworth might. And if he has taken others, there would be confirmation. Any of that crew would turn King's evidence with Hornygold to save their necks. And I swear——" Heated as he was, he broke off at the sight of Catherine's eyes, fixed on him, full of woe.

"You swear—what? That you will have me arrested for a pirate?"

"The blackest that ever sailed under the crossbones. Blackbeard was a sucking child—to you. Do you think you can carry it off, man, after what has happened in these three days? If you have wit and would save your neck, when you ride with Hornygold you will ride out of Bay Town for ever."

"And leave a clear coast for a very hot wooer, hey?" the man laughed jeeringly. Then he turned to the girl. "Come, Catherine, my father waits. We can leave this gentleman to his heated fancies. I do not know what is in his mind unless he has a thought that he will denounce our marriage at the altar steps. . . . That might gratify his taste for the dramatic——"

"Catherine," broke in Sir Harry to the girl. "You must not marry this man——"

"I forbid the banns!" interrupted Passmore sneeringly. "Come, Catherine! My father may be even now in the very grove of death. And no doubt he is still looking for—asking for you. Sir Harry's whimsies cannot be allowed to stand in the way of our duties."

He held out a hand to the girl, but she did not take it. Without a word she moved towards the door, but there looked back with a tragic appeal in her eyes. Then Passmore started to follow. As he passed Sir Harry, his face was livid, and there was a flame of rage in his dark eyes.

"Some day, my cock, I will kill you for this!"

"And some day, if you do not go this very night—Lucifer, you will swing in chains and tar. I promise you that."

"You give me that name? By heavens! but for——"

"Roger! Roger!" came the girl's appealing voice.

And with the hate flaming in his sombre eyes, the man turned and hurried to her.

Sir Harry waited, quite still. He heard their horses go round the house, and move up the road. Presently the sound of them died away, and still he stood lost in thought. Presently he awoke to the fact that the sexton was standing in the doorway blinking at him. There was an odd, crafty look on the man's face, and the fellow was plainly bursting to speak.

"What is it, sexton?" he asked sharply.

"That name! Yo' heard the name that villain upstairs gave the gentleman? An' the name of the ship—the *Black Adventure*. It's just come to my mind—that business of the *Saint Christopher* that was in all men's mouths. There was a reward posted up in every port—even here in Bay Town. Two hundred guineas 'twas for the man who brought the devils to the dock. An' here's two o' them, an' one o' them Lucifer hisself! The reward still holds, an' what for should a man not claim it?"

"I don't know!" answered Sir Harry quickly. "You might ask the man himself when you ride with him in the coach he is bringing."

"Ask him? Not me! The look of him turns me cold. But a word to Mackworth an' his riding-officers an' the trick's done."

"Yes! Yes!" said Sir Harry absently.

It would suit his own purpose very well to have Roger Passmore removed from Bay Town out of hand. That way Catherine would be saved from the appalling thing to which she was committed, but he knew that she would never forgive him if he took that way. There must be other ways—cleaner ways. Perhaps on reflection Passmore himself would take the one way of safety—in flight.



The more he thought, the more that seemed likely. When he went with Hornygold he might not return. That might be in his mind, and all the rest—bravado ! It would be worth while to wait—— The sexton's voice, shaking with excitement, broke on his reflections.

" I'll go find Mackworth now. An' when my fine gentleman comes with the coach, the riding-officers'll be waiting, an'——"

" No," said Sir Harry sharply. " You will not go to-night, sexton. Officer Mackworth would not believe such a wild tale on your word——"

" But yo' heard, too, Sir Harry. There's yo'r word to support mine——"

" Not to-night, sexton ! You will do as I say. Your own hands are not quite clean, you know. There's the matter of that peacock——"

" That blazing wonder ! My stars——"

" Mackworth might prove too inquisitive for your comfort."

" But yo' wouldn't let Lucifer walk the earth—free ? "

" Till Saturday," replied Sir Harry quickly. " If that marriage goes forward——"

" Lor' help the poor lady ! " said the man.

" That is just what I want to do—but not this way if I can avoid it. She may cry the marriage off herself. I pray Heaven she may ! But if not, then you can pass the word to Officer Mackworth on Saturday morning an hour before the time fixed for the wedding, and I will corroborate. If Miss Catherine will not save herself, then we must save her from herself."

" I don't properly understand——"

" No need that you should. For to-night you will hold your tongue if Mr. Mackworth comes back here——"

" And that devil upstairs ? "

" Leave him to Passmore. He's no man for such as you to tackle. You must know that, sexton."

" None better," groaned the sexton, with a hand for his blistered chin.

" Then we'll leave things so. In the morning I will

come here and learn how you have fared. I must go now. But if any untoward thing should happen—before you act, come to me at the Priory. You understand ? ”

“ Yes, Sir Harry.”

“ Good ! ”

A rumbling shout came from overhead, and the sexton whispered : “ There’s that rascal calling ! ”

“ Yes ! You’d better warn him to keep quiet. The officers may be about. . . . Good night ! ”

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE NUN’S REVELATION

ONCE in the street, he stood listening, looking about him in the starlit darkness. Far off he thought he caught a sound of hoofs, and once he was sure he heard distant shouting, which speedily died away. He looked towards the sea, and some distance out saw the riding-lights of a ship.

“ The lugger,” he thought to himself, and wondered if the men who had fled had managed to board her. He stood watching for a little time, then, following an unaccountable instinct, turned and swung downhill in the direction of Bay Town. It might, he thought, be worth while to see Peter Harland, and if possible learn what had happened.

The street, as he walked down it, might have been a street of the dead. Everything was silent, all the shutters closed, not a glint of light anywhere. An astonishing thing, he thought, until he reflected that the inhabitants might have misconstrued the activity of the riding-officers as being directed against the smuggling interests of the Bay, and, for once, conscious of their innocence, were keeping out of the way of trouble. But when he reached Harland’s tavern, he found a crowd of men outside watching the lugger’s lights, and offering various and noisy explanations.

"A King's ship," was the verdict of the most vociferous.

"But what's she there for—with never a cask afloat?"

"An' the gun? What was that for? There's mysterious doings somewhere!"

Apparently the men knew nothing of what had happened at the sexton's cottage, which was almost incredible to him till he reflected that the cottage was remote from the huddled streets, and that anything might chance to happen there, without the immediate knowledge of those in the town. Pushing his way into the inn, he encountered Peter Harland with a trayful of mugs of ale.

"Ye've seen her, Sir Harry?" cried the innkeeper in an excited voice.

"The lugger, you mean? Yes, I——"

"Not the lugger! The Papist nun who was here Christmas night. She's gone up to the Priory to seek ye—this hour or more. There's strange things abroad."

"Get rid of that ale, quick, Harland! Where shall we be quiet?"

"In the kitchen, Sir Harry, if ye don't mind."

Sir Harry stalked into the kitchen, and kicked his toes impatiently until Harland returned and shut the door behind him.

"Tell me all, Peter. That woman has returned, you say?"

"An' has gone up to the Priory in a sweat to seek ye! The quarest thing."

"Get at it, man. Don't beat about."

"'Tis a little more than an hour by the clock since a coach drove up to the door, an' me going out, the postilion says, 'There's a holy woman within wants a lodging for the night, an' I want stabling for the hosses an' a hayloft for myself.' Before I could guess what he meant by holy woman, the door opened an' out stepped that Papist nun what was here three nights ago. Ye could have knocked me down with a feather when I saw her, me remembering how she'd hurried out of Bay Town as if the devil was at her heels, but she was calm as ye please.

"'Landlord,' says she in a voice that wasn't by no

manner of means so meek as her dress. 'I want to stay with you a day or two. You can offer me accommodation, I hope?'

" 'Why, yes,' said I. 'An' the hosses an' the driver?'

" 'They stay also,' she answered, and moved on indoors, whilst I stopped to give the postboy his directions.

" When I came back to the house to ask for further orders, the nun was by the hearth warming her feet, an' before I'd time to speak she began. 'Sit down, landlord, there is a question or two I want to ask: an' there really is no need for you to stand on civility.'

" So I sat, being bidden, whilst the nun stood looking into the fire for quite awhile, with me wondering all the time what was coming; then she turned round suddenly and asked sharply: 'Is Squire Passmore's son still at home?'

" 'Why, yes, ma'am,' said I; 'an' likely to stop there, seeing that the old Squire is in a bad way.'

" 'Oh!' she whispered, more to herself than to me; then asked mechanically, 'Is that so?'

" 'It is,' said I. 'There's a report that his time is far spent with but a few hours left.'

" She hadn't expected that. Ye could see that much with half an eye, an' for a goodish bit she never spoke, but stood staring in the fire, with a troubled kind of look in her eyes. Then she broke silence.

" 'If Squire Passmore were to die——'

" 'He'll do that—soon!' I jerked in.

" 'Then in that case what will happen to that child you spoke about when last I was here—the child saved from the *Golden Fortune*? She will be homeless, I suppose?'

" 'No,' I answered, carelesslike, wondering what her interest was. 'She's going to be mistress of Wyke, seeing as how she an' Roger Passmore are to be made one come Saturday.'

" If I'd blown a cannon off in her ear, the woman couldn't have been more startled. She stared at me as if I'd told her a thing past believing; then something came into her face an' shone in the sorrowful eyes of her that made me shiver. Horror! That's what 'twas—just

naked horror, if ever I saw it in this world. Then she raps out in a shaking, whispering voice :

“ ‘ Mother of God, spare me—and the child ! It must not be. It would be a crime ! ’ ”

“ I was one with her there, but I said nothing, and sat there thinking just that she was remembering that Roger Passmore was responsible for the wrecking of the *Golden Fortune*, an’ that she thought a marriage between him an’ Miss Catherine would be an offence to God an’ man, considering how he’d orphaned her ; but there was more than that to it, I’ll be sworn.”

“ What ? ” asked Sir Harry quickly.

“ Nay, that I can’t tell ye, Sir Harry. She made no mention of it, but ’twas written in her face an’ burning in her eyes ; and suddenly she snaps out : ‘ Is there a priest in Bay Town ? ’ ”

“ ‘ Why, yes,’ said I, ‘ there’s the old parson, but he’s no good to help ye, if that’s what ye’re wanting, for by this hour he’s under the table or being tucked between the blankets by his man—drunk as an owl.’ ”

“ ‘ Dear God ! ’ she whispered to herself. ‘ Whom can I trust ? To whom shall I go ? ’ ”

“ Then, Sir Harry, I drew a bow at a venture. ‘ If ye’re looking for one who’s a friend of Mistress Catherine, ye might do a sight worse than try Sir Harry up at the Priory. He’s a friend of the maid’s, an’ no friend of Roger Passmore’s, though ye did see them together the last time ye were here, ma’am,’ said I.

“ ‘ Is he the gentleman who was with Roger Passmore in that room at Wyke House on Christmas Eve ? ’ ”

“ ‘ The very same, ma’am,’ said I, ‘ an’ a very good friend of Miss Catherine’s, having already saved her from a lot of dirty rascals who upset her coach on the road. He’s the gentleman ye can trust with Miss Catherine’s interests, if so be they’re wantin’ watching, an’ I’ll wager my house he’s none too well pleased with that wedding to be that ye say will be a crime, in which saying I’m at one with ye, my lady.’ ”

“ Then she whispered again. ‘ I must go to him—tell



him all. He will understand, and he will stop it.' She turned on me sharp. 'Where shall I find this Sir Harry?'

"I told her, describing how to get to your house, Sir Harry, where I'll lay she's a-waiting ye at this very hour, for she went off at once and hasn't come back yet."

"Then I must go," said Sir Harry. "And I pray Heaven that I may not miss her. There's nothing else, Harland?"

"Nothing save the mystery of that lugger out in the Bay, an' a rumour that there's a party of riding-officers abroad——"

Sir Harry nodded and turned to the door. "If I should miss her, and she returns, say I shall come straight back here, Harland."

"Right, sir!"

Half a minute later Sir Harry was moving through the men congregated in the street watching the ship's lights out in the Bay.

"She's putting out," he heard one man say, but did not so much as turn his head to look.

His interest in the lugger was quite gone, overwhelmed by the thought of the woman awaiting him, who, it seemed, knew something that would make the marriage of Catherine and Roger Passmore impossible. What it was he could not even conjecture, but as he hurried up the steep street he rejoiced at the thought that he was to learn something that would deliver Catherine from the promise she had made.

At the top of the bank, he gave a single glance at the sexton's cottage. There was a light there in an upper room—the room where Hornygold lay, as he guessed, and he told himself that Roger Passmore's promise of a coach, to enable the old quartermaster of the *Black Adventure* to make good his escape, had not yet been fulfilled. He wondered if it ever would be, or if Passmore would yet find some darker way of ridding himself of so inconvenient a witness from his black past.

He made his own gates without encountering anyone, and hurried forward to the house. Mrs. Braviner met him in the hall.

"There's a visitor for you, sir; a Papist sister, and perishing with impatience to——"

"I know. Where is she?"

"In the dining-room, where——"

Sir Harry strode on, reached the door and opened it. As he did so, the woman, who had been staring out of the window, turned swiftly, and as he saw her he suffered a shock of surprise.

The face on which he looked was pale as death, but of a ravaged beauty that told him that at some time, not so very long ago, it had been a face to take men's eyes. The eyes were blue, bright at the moment with some strong emotion, but at the same time exceedingly sorrowful; and her womanly form, despite its sombre robing, showed itself of shapely line. As he stood there, a look of inquiry on his face, she started forward.

"Oh, sir," she began in a quivering voice, "you will pardon this intrusion of a stranger, but I am in bitter need, and know not to whom to turn for help, save you. That man at the inn told me that—that——"

"Yes! Harland told me you needed me. Believe me, madame, I am quite at your service, as I am at Miss Catherine's, whom you also would serve, I gather."

"It is this marriage that the innkeeper told me of. It must be stopped! It is a heinous thing," she cried, her voice strained and shaking. "An offence to God!"

"I am one with you there. I have learned much to-day about that man. Two nights ago I came near to killing him, and instead I saved him from those who would surely have done so. But I did not know then what I know now, or they could have torn him to ribbons for me."

"You hate him?" the woman whispered. "You have fought with him? Oh, why did you not kill him? You would have rid the world of a monster."

There was a tenseness of passion in her whispering voice, a flashing hate in her eyes that contrasted ill with her holy garb, and startled Sir Harry unutterably. He had a thought that the woman was insane, and the thought

expressed itself in his face. The woman read it, and cried quiveringly :

" Oh, I am not mad, as you think, though I have sorrow to turn the brain a hundred times ! But I hate that man, as never woman hated, for what he has done—but more for what he would do. That innocent child——"

Her voice broke, she stood there, her eyes burning, her face working, her whole form shaking like an aspen. Then she broke out again :

" How can he ? How can he ? And how can Catherine contemplate him ? Innocence should know evil of its own instinct and shrink from it before it is shrivelled."

" Madame," said Sir Harry quickly, " you do Catherine wrong. This is no love-match for her. She owes much to old Squire Passmore——"

" No ! " cried the nun. " It is he who is in her debt for his son's black crime. Anything that he has done for the child was due to her a hundredfold."

" Granted, madame ! But the girl has never known anything of all that until two days ago. The old Squire has been as a father to her. And she is of a sweet and gracious nature. On the very night of Roger Passmore's return—the night you stared at her through the window——"

" You saw me ? " cried the nun.

" No ! Catherine saw you, but I for one thought that it was her own reflection in the glass and persuaded her also, though in the morning I knew otherwise, for your footprints were in the snow, and I found your broken rosary. But that is of no importance. On that very night, within an hour of his son's return, the old Squire had conceived the marriage and mentioned it to the two concerned. It was in his mind that so his son should complete the reparation he himself had tried to make through all these fifteen years since the child drifted ashore on that wild Christmas morning. He does not know that Roger Passmore is more evil now than he was when in anger at his dark deed he drove him to exile. He

is the forgiving father of the parable. He dotes on his prodigal—and he is very sick—a dying man. Catherine is grateful and of loyal nature. She made the old man a promise to marry his son—and the fulfilment of the promise is being hurried. But—what a fulfilment! You never heard the like, madame.” Swiftly he detailed the girl’s wishes as they had been set forth by Peter Harland, and then he cried: “Was ever such a sorrowful bride? Is she, think you, taking her heart to church? If so, it is to bury it.”

He stopped, as the woman, hiding her face in her hands, broke into a storm of weeping, and for a moment he stood shaken by his own passion; then he went on sombrely:

“It is a thing to make angels weep for the pity of it—that a girl’s gratitude and loyalty should be so exploited.”

“Oh!” whispered the woman brokenly. “You must stop it.”

“Stop it.” Sir Harry laughed harshly, mirthlessly. “Oh, I will stop it—though I turn Judas and sell the man to the law, or run my sword through him at the church gates, and kill my own hope with the same stroke.”

“Ah!” said the nun, lifting her head suddenly and staring at him through her tears. “You love her?”

“Better than my own life. And her love is mine. But for this d——d promise exacted from her——”

The words died on his lips as he stared at the woman. A strange expression had come on her face. Her eyes seemed to glow through her tears; there was about her a look that puzzled him—a look, yes, that was it!—a look of exaltation. Then she began to whisper, brokenly, but with a certain assurance as of one speaking with utter conviction.

“Then not you but I shall save her . . . save you both. . . . It is . . . my bitter cross . . . and my salvation that I should do so. . . . When I see her . . . no, him! . . . I could never tell her, in her innocence, of my shame . . . but when I see him . . . tell him the truth, even his black soul will recoil from the evil thing. . . . He could not . . . and if he would he should

not . . . before that I will even tell Catherine . . . all ! ”

The whispering broke off. She looked at him and there was about her still that exaltation that goes with great sacrifice, a thing that transformed her, that reminded him of——

“ Madame,” he cried with sudden understanding. “ Who are you ? What are you to Catherine ? ”

“ God help me ! ” whispered the nun brokenly, “ I am her mother.”

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE NUN'S STORY

NOT for a moment did Sir Harry question the nun's startling statement. The exaltation that had transfigured her had given her face a momentary youthfulness, and the likeness between her and the girl she claimed for her daughter was very plain. Also there were the other things. The story of her quickening interest when she had discovered that a child had survived the wrecking of the *Golden Fortune* ; her strange visit to Wyke House, which had nothing to do with Roger Passmore, however the sight of the latter had frightened her, but was concerned entirely with the girl ; and again her new concern for Catherine on learning of the projected marriage with Passmore, a concern so great that it had driven her to come to himself to seek the help of a stranger.

There were things not clear to him as he stood there with her words in his ears, but that she spoke the truth he had no doubt whatever. But in what relation did she stand to Roger Passmore, whom she had not known by that name until Harland had told her the truth ? That she knew him for the evil man he was, and that she hated him vehemently for some personal reason, apart altogether from Catherine, her wild words had made clear ; but what was the cause of such deep hate ?

All these things and questions passed through his mind



with the swiftness of thought as he stood there silent in the face of the nun's revelation of the truth, and his visitor broke out, imploringly :

" You do not doubt—you believe me ? "

" Without reservation, madame. Catherine is very like you in feature, so like——"

" I pray Heaven she may not be like me in sorrow," broke in the nun. " But that shall not be ! Roger Passmore, as you call him——"

" Pardon me, madame, that name for the man of whom we speak is new to you. Till within these three days or so you had never heard him so called. Under what name was he known to you when peeping through the lattice at Wyke you saw him so unexpectedly ? "

" The name was a fitting one," answered the woman tensely. " He was known to me as Lucifer."

" Ah ! "

As the interjection broke from Sir Harry, the woman flashed a swift interrogatory glance.

" You also know him under that evil name ? " she whispered.

" I had guessed the association in almost the same hour that you learned his birth-name ; that is within an hour or two of our meeting. He has his enemies in the neighbourhood, members of his piratical crew, some of whom sought a treasure he had, whilst one most certainly sought his life, a blackamoor——"

" Black Tom ! " whispered the woman, more to herself than to him.

Sir Harry permitted himself a passing wonder at the intimacy of her knowledge, and went on :

" On the night of my arrival here those men attacked Catherine's coach by mistake, I think under the impression that Passmore was in it. I arrived most opportunely, having already encountered Passmore at a lonely inn where he had betrayed apprehension at the news of a blackamoor in the neighbourhood and had ridden away on my horse without even a by-your-leave. One of the men who attacked the coach as I rode up gripped my

bridle and shouted the name to his fellows—Lucifer ; and within two hours I had fitted the name to Passmore, without, however, associating it with the infamous Lucifer of the *Black Adventure*. . . . That knowledge came to me only yesterday, when I learned it from some of his old associates, who spoke of the sack and burning of the *Saint Christopher*. There was one of them, a man named Hornygold, who——”

He broke off sharply. The nun had suddenly buried her face in her hands, and was sobbing convulsively—great tearless sobs that shook her from head to foot, whilst desolate, moaning sounds came from her. That he had awakened some agonizing memory was clear to him, and he stood there, helpless, uncertain how to proceed, whilst he wondered what association she had with that dreadful crime of the seas. Then she looked up with woeful eyes.

“ Yes ? ” she said between her sobs. “ Yes ? ”

“ Oh,” he said, jumping to his conclusion. “ It was so I learned the truth about Roger Passmore, the truth that you also know, it seems. I thought then that heaven had given me a weapon that would make it easy to spoil this marriage, but—but I am not sure. If, like myself, you are counting on that knowledge to make Passmore relinquish his purpose and send him in headlong flight, it is possible that you may fail, as I have failed. There is but one way, other than slaying him, in which the weapon that knowledge is can be used, and that is by handing him to the law. It is a Judas part that I do not care to play——”

“ There is no need that you should,” said the woman swiftly. “ The knowledge will suffice.”

“ But if it should fail——”

“ The knowledge I have will prevail. When Roger Passmore has seen me, and has heard the secret of Catherine’s birth——” She interrupted herself. “ You are wondering at my confidence. I must tell the story . . . that you may understand. . . . You mentioned the sack and burning of the *Saint Christopher*. You perhaps remember something of that dreadful crime ? ”

"A little, what was in the news-sheets ; sufficient at any rate !"

"I was there——"

"Ah ! my poor lady !"

"We were homeward bound from the Indies, laden with rich merchandise, things of fabulous value——"

"I have seen one of them to-night," broke in Sir Harry—"the Golden Peacock."

"Yes ! There was that and other things. The *Saint Christopher* was the richest prize for the corsairs of a generation. Everything was going merrily. There were many passengers, some men, more women and a handful of children, all eager for England after years in the East—even I, who had lost my child when she had been sent home to my people in charge of friends. My husband had remained behind, and was to follow in two years, but I was eager as all the others, and happy in anticipation.

"Then one dread morning, off the African Coast, three ships appeared with the dawn, quite close, having, as was supposed, been lying hidden in some fold of the coast. They were pursuing us, that was clear ; and presently they fired a gun, and at the mast of the leading ship the rovers' flag was hoisted. . . . Oh ! the hideous thing ! It burns in my brain now ! I can see it like a splotch of night against the blue of the sky !"

She broke off, shaken by the strong emotion the memory gave rise to, and Sir Harry intervened.

"Madame, it is not necessary that you should so distress yourself by relating painful things. I know sufficient of the dreadful story. The *Saint Christopher* was taken after a fight and the men, many of them, were made to walk the plank in fiendish fashion, and the ship fired——"

"You have omitted a detail—an essential one for my story," interrupted the nun. "You have not mentioned the women. Many of us were young—and the rovers were fiends ! . . . For us there was no choice. . . . Some had the courage to die. I saw women—girls the age of

my Catherine—hurl themselves into the sea, where the sharks, fed by the men who had walked the plank, were swarming hideously. . . . Some had not the courage for that death. . . . I was among those.” The woman bowed her head. . . . “God . . .” she whispered brokenly. “God pity me !”

“Amen !” prayed Sir Harry softly, greatly moved as he watched the sorrowing woman, who had suffered so much.

For a little time the nun stood there, overcome by bitter sorrow, then she continued, slowly and with difficulty.

“The rovers had a kind of settlement on the Guinea Coast where they lived riotously—the Apes of Kings. There were houses there . . . slaves . . . women of many colours, and children—God help them ! We were taken there and the spoil apportioned—we with it. . . . That man Hornygold, whose name you mentioned just now, would have taken me, but Lucifer intervened. . . . I—I was taken by him——”

“Ah ! God pity you, madame ! Now I understand.”

The woman was silent again, save for the sobs which broke from her at intervals, but when she resumed, her eyes were dry, and there was a hard look on her face.

“I was there with him four years—a terrible time. The place was fever-stricken ; the men were turbulent ; the women, many of them, vile. There were those who had gone willingly ; others, like those from the *Saint Christopher*, taken by force, who, lost to their friends and to all hope, had grown so accustomed as to find the evil life tolerable. . . . For me, with that man, it was a place of the damned. . . . There were brawls, fights every day as it seemed to me, for the rum flowed like water, and women too free with their favours were a constant source of trouble.

“Lucifer was the head of the confederacy. He ruled it like an autocrat, but there were times when he had to fight for his position—and even for me, when some foul rover cast his eyes my way. Occasions there were when his tyranny was more terrible than the fighting to main-

tain his hold on the place. There was that man Black Tom, who for some offence he tied up to a post and had him lashed till his back was like raw meat, with those demon rovers shouting to the men with the whips to strike harder, and the children laughing and shrieking with foul delight—a scene from hell, with the black's shuddering groans for the moans of the lost. . . . When the whipping was over, they left him tied there in the sun with the flies, myriads of them, crawling over him. A white man must have died under the whipping ; but this man lived through all. I myself went out and gave him water, and Lucifer laughed at me for my pains. A week later the black left the settlement and was seen no more——”

“ He is seeking Lucifer's life here, now. And Lucifer knows it and is afraid ! ”

“ I could find it within me to rejoice,” said the nun, with a sudden passionate note in her voice. “ That he should suffer tormenting fear is but the justice of God.” She was silent again for a little while, then in a flat emotionless voice she resumed :

“ There were times when he went away on a cruise, and most of the men went with him. At such times some of the women were in fear lest their men should not return, but I was always in fear that Lucifer would, and in his absences I began to plan an escape. There was a man there, little more than a boy, who had been pressed into the rovers' service, and who hated it from his soul. He was of a gentle ancestry, and he was willing to help me. . . . There were small boats in plenty, and we began to gather provisions. Then one day Lucifer came from the sea, but not alone. There was with him a girl of France, all life and laughter—and I—I was no merry mistress, as you may guess.”

“ ‘ Go ! ’ he said to me, as one speaks to a dog.

“ ‘ But where ? ’ I asked, to test him, for I was glad of the word.

“ ‘ Body of God ! ’ he cried. ‘ There are men enough in the street—black and white. Would you have me turn pimp ? ’



"I went, and that very night I and the boy stole a boat and crept up the coast. . . . But why should I lengthen the story when I have told you that which matters? . . . When I see your Roger Passmore, who was the Lucifer I knew before I crept into a convent—since my husband was quite lost to me—do you think he will dare——"

"Madame, there is no saying! The man's soul is sold to evil!"

"God would curse the man!"

"That is likely, but Roger Passmore is in a tight place. This very night he has lost a great treasure, and his father's estate is willed to Catherine. If he marries her, it becomes his; if not, he is a beggar. He may persist——"

"No! He dare not. . . . You will take me to him. . . . I will confront him, and after that he will not dare."

"But if he should?"

"Oh!" cried the woman, "there is the law—and Catherine. If she knew——"

"I hope to God she never may, madame! You have suffered too much. But it is a strange thing that first Catherine and then you should suffer at his hands, and none of you know till now . . . when you come here by chance to discover the truth and save your daughter."

"It is the hand of God!" said the woman. "Let us go, quickly."

"Quickly! Yes! I was forgetting. There may be need for haste. Passmore may be leaving Wyke House for some hours . . . and when he sees you and knows what we know about Catherine he may go with his own back to his own. . . . If you will excuse me, madame, I will order the coach."

He bowed and went out, and as he closed the door he saw the woman of such tragic fate slip to her knees, and bow her head in her hands upon the table.

## CHAPTER XXVII

## A CONFRONTATION

OUTSIDE the door Sir Harry halted to consider his further action. To take the stricken woman within to Wyke House seemed imperative, but that Catherine should hear her sorrowful story was a thing too terrible to contemplate. There was woe enough for her without searing her mind with that tragic story, and as he thought of what it would mean for the unhappy woman within to have to relate it with her own daughter for audience, his gorge rose.

"No!" he whispered in stern resolve. "I will save them both from that. Either I will fight him—kill him, or let the sexton do his worst!"

Passmore should be confronted with the nun; he should be told the truth, and if he persisted in his foul purpose after that, then one way or the other he should be thwarted without Catherine ever knowing the dreadful truth. That resolution made, he gave orders for the coach to be brought to the door as quickly as possible; then in view of what might chance, he went to the library and was busy making a choice between his swords, when his housekeeper hurried in.

"Mr. Mackworth is at the door, Sir Harry, and would like to see you."

"Very well, bring him here."

Half a minute later, the Revenue officer entered. The first glance at his face told Sir Harry that he was a disappointed man. His words almost immediately confirmed the impression.

"Those rascals got clean away, Sir Harry. They scattered and took to the fields, and in the darkness pursuit was hopeless. They had a boat somewhere, for two of the riding-officers who had chased one of them in the direction of the shore heard row-locks going, and saw the lights of that lugger standing close in—doubtless to pick them up, but what mystifies me is what they were doing here at all and what they were doing down at the sexton's."

" You've asked him ? " inquired Sir Harry quietly, though his heart was beating wildly as he thought of the possibility of the Revenue officer having stumbled on the track of the truth.

" The sexton knows nothing."

Sir Harry took a long breath ; as he thought, the sexton had elected to keep the secret, doubtless with the idea that it would be the most profitable way.

" Those ruffians maltreated him shamefully. He says they invaded his cottage with you a prisoner——"

" Yes, that is true," answered Sir Harry, watching the officer carefully for any sign of knowledge that he had not spoken. He saw none, and went on easily : " You know they had abducted Squire Passmore's niece ? "

" Yes, Roger Passmore told me that. I met him, almost frantic with the news, when I was patrolling with five officers, having seen signal flares on the coast and at sea, and having the idea that the Bay men were running a cargo which of course it was my duty to prevent. He had scarcely told the story, when Miss Catherine herself came tearing down the street with the news that the ruffians had you prisoner, you having endangered your life to save her. She said they had you in the churchyard, and that they were looking for something they could not find—some treasure, I gathered——"

" Yes ! It was supposed to be hidden in one of the tombs, but the hiding-place was empty."

For a moment Sir Harry hesitated, tempted to tell the man the whole truth and let Roger Passmore take his chance ; then he put the temptation from him, and continued easily : " Naturally they were disappointed men, and as Miss Catherine escaped on my horse, whilst they were searching, they were rather in a rage with me. You came in the nick of time."

" We heard shouting in the sexton's house, and thought they might be there, but we made our dispositions a little carelessly, I am afraid, and the rascals were smart. They slashed the horses, throwing them into confusion——"

" Clever ! " commented Sir Harry.

" Yes! That and the darkness enabled them to get away." The officer whistled a little lugubriously, and then asked: " How did they come to take you, Sir Harry? "

" I was looking for Miss Passmore, and remembering having seen two men going towards that deserted farm beyond the beck that runs down to the old mill, I rode out to investigate. They were lighting the signal fire you saw, and almost immediately fell on me——"

" Lucky you were not killed, Sir Harry. They're a rough crew. But what can they have wanted with Miss Passmore? "

" A ransom—possibly? " suggested Sir Harry calmly.

" Then they must have been a daring lot—to think they could carry through a thing like that, even in this desolate district."

" They may have counted on the Squire's weakness for his niece——"

" Or on Roger Passmore's," broke in Mr. Mackworth brusquely.

Sir Harry caught his breath again. Did the man know or guess the truth? The officer's next words increased his anxiety.

" It's a queer thing that the advent of this ruffianly crew coincides with the return of the Squire's son, who, if rumour is true, led a wild youth."

" Why, yes! But their advent coincides also with my arrival in the parish," answered Sir Harry, with a forced laugh. " So there may be nothing in that."

" On the other hand they may have had some grudge against Passmore, which would account for their abduction of Miss Catherine."

" That, of course, is possible——"

Sir Harry broke off at the sound of wheels grinding the ground outside, more than thankful at the interruption.

" Mr. Mackworth," he said, " you will excuse me if I dismiss you. I have to go to Wyke House immediately. That is the carriage you hear."

" Certainly, Sir Harry. I understand Squire Passmore is in a precarious condition."

"Dying—I am afraid."

"Ah, that is bad."

The officer rose, and Sir Harry accompanied him to the door.

"No chance of taking any of the rogues now, I suppose?"

"Not likely, sir! If only the Revenue cutter for which I sent yesterday had arrived, something might have been done. As it is, the rascals may be half-way to Holland by morning. Ill luck, Sir Harry, hey?"

"Very!" agreed Sir Harry, and then stood to watch the other mount and ride away in the darkness.

When the sound of his going had quite ceased to be heard, Sir Harry drew a breath of relief and then frowned. He had deceived the man, but might yet be compelled to tell him the truth and seek his aid. That was an uncomfortable reflection, and it remained with him, even when, with the nun by his side, he started for Wyke House, and he sat lost in thought, with his companion equally silent until they saw the lights of Wyke lift themselves among the embosoming trees. It struck him as he looked at them that there were many, that the whole front of the house was lit up; and as he thought of the possibility that might indicate, he was the more anxious to get to their destination. If Squire Passmore were already dead, Catherine would have need of friends.

They reached the gates of Wyke and then came a check. They were locked. The coachman reported the situation and asked for instructions.

"I am afraid, madame, that we shall have to dismount and walk. There is a side gate——"

"Let us take it, Sir Harry. I am in a fever to have my task done."

They descended from the coach, and Sir Harry gave instructions.

"If we are not back in half an hour, return home."

"Yes, Sir Harry."

With the nun leaning on Sir Harry's arm they made the side gate, and followed a narrow way through the long



shrubbery. Half-way to the house, the woman halted suddenly.

"I hear something."

Sir Harry listened, and distinctly caught the champing of a horse on the bit, followed a second later by the pawing of a hoof on hard ground.

"Wait," he said. "I will investigate."

He crept forward cautiously, through the starlit darkness, and after a very little search came on a horse tethered to a tree. The creature whinnied as he approached and he stared at it in some amazement. To whom did it belong; and why had it been tethered here—in a place of concealment? A little puzzled, he returned to where the lady awaited him.

"You found something?" she asked quickly.

"A strange thing! A tethered horse, concealed among the bushes. In Heaven's name, what can it mean?"

Then a thought came to him. Perhaps, knowing as he must the risk that Hornygold might betray him, Passmore had stationed this horse here, ready to carry him away at the first alarm.

"Yes," he said, "that will be it," and explained the situation as he conceived it to his companion.

"That is a possibility," she agreed. "And I could wish that he had already used the horse, that I might be spared the agony of——"

"Courage, madame!" he whispered. "Remember, it is to help Catherine."

"I would do it for no other reason," she answered quietly. "Let us go forward."

They walked onward, but whilst yet they were a little distance from the house, Sir Harry gave a startled exclamation.

"You saw?" he asked quickly.

"I saw two men slip by that lighted window."

"Yes!" he said, staring across the intervening darkness. "I wonder who they can be?" Then the explanation occurred to him. "Ah! That will account for them. Roger Passmore, fearing an attack, has men from Bay Town to keep watch and guard the house."

They moved forward again, and in a short time reached the terrace. As they crossed towards the door, they passed the window where the woman had stood on Christmas night, and both instinctively looked in the lighted room, where many candles burned. Almost simultaneously the woman gave a gasp, and halted, the hand on Sir Harry's arm trembling violently.

"Oh!" she whispered. "Oh!"

He had seen the cause of her emotion—Roger Passmore, seated in a great chair by the fire, a table drawn to his side, on which stood a decanter and a glass. There was a black look on the man's face, and whatever his thoughts might be, that look indicated that they were not pleasant ones. For a moment, whilst he waited for his companion to recover, Sir Harry stared at the man who, all unconscious that he was watched, lifted his glass and drained it, and proceeded to refill it. Then Passmore lurched to his feet, and began to pace the room.

The nun trembled more violently than ever, and Sir Harry feared that she would fall into a faint; and again he whispered in her ear:

"Courage! madame. Courage! You have nothing to fear, and that man has everything. When he sees you, it will be the end of all things for him. Pull your veil well down."

The woman obeyed him, and with a great effort controlled herself. He made to move forward again, but she checked him with a shaking whisper.

"Wait! Watch!"

The man within had ceased to pace, and was halted beside a bureau, the polished handles of which twinkled in the candle-light. There was a bunch of keys in his hand, one of which he fitted to a drawer, which presently he slid open. He rummaged among its contents, and after a little search, lifted from them a long folded document, tied with tape. Whilst they watched, he slipped the tape and unfolding the document began to read. A minute later he lifted his face. It wore an expression of diabolic rage, but a second later, as he glanced towards the fire, the

rage faded, giving place to an evil smile. As he watched, Sir Harry had an intuition. As surely as if he had stood behind the man's shoulder while he read, he knew that the document in his hand was Squire Passmore's will. And that glance at the fire with the evil smile revealed that he was contemplating its destruction. That might mean that whatever had befallen since he had left the sexton's house with Catherine, Roger Passmore had lost hope of her—or was he just making sure of his inheritance?

There was a sudden fading of light about them, and looking up he saw that now all the upper windows were dark, save one, the white curtains of which were drawn, whilst within candles burned. That, he remembered, was the Squire's chamber, and whilst he stared up, it was borne on him suddenly that the doting old man was spared what must have been the ultimate sorrow of his life. He turned to the woman at his side.

"Come," he whispered. "If he should retire——"

The woman's grasp on his arm became firmer as they moved towards the door, and almost in the shadow of it he whispered a last instruction.

"Do not speak at the first. Keep your veil down. Stand a little in the shadow when the door is opened."

Then he knocked gently, sufficiently loud to be heard below, but not in the upper chambers of the house, and almost instantly there was the sound of hurried steps in the hall—steps which, as they approached the door, faltered and then ceased.

He knocked again. The steps sounded anew, came close to the door and halted; then there was the sound of Passmore's voice, hoarse and low.

"Who is there?"

"It is I—Sir Harry Plaxton. Open to me. I must speak with you to-night. The matter is urgent."

"Damnation!"

The word came in an explosive whisper, betokening a sudden rage; then hurriedly bolts were withdrawn, and as the door opened the woman stepped into the shadows. A second later Passmore stood revealed.

"You come here—to-night!" he said in a wrathful whisper. "To a house of the dead! D—you! What brings you?"

"Softly, Passmore," answered the other quickly. "I have a lady here!"

"A lady?"

The man's wrath gave place to complete astonishment. He stared first at Sir Harry, and then to and fro until his eyes caught sight of the shrouded figure in the shadows, where they rested in complete bewilderment.

"Yes, a lady who desired to see you, and who would have her presence secret. You will invite her in? Come, madame!"

The woman moved out of the shadows, and as Passmore saw her dress, his bewilderment grew.

"A holy sister!" he whispered. "What wants she with me?"

"That is for her to say. I am but her conductor. But it will be well for you to hear her. She is the lady who stared in at your window on Christmas Eve."

Passmore shot another curious glance at the veiled woman, visibly hesitated, then spoke in a harsh whisper:

"I can give the lady five minutes. You will step quietly—I should not like my cousin to be disturbed in her grief." He turned on his heel and led the way to the room where they had seen him. The woman followed with faltering steps, and hurrying to support her, Sir Harry never thought to close the door.

As they entered the room, Passmore turned and looked at the veiled woman. Curiosity was the dominant thing in his face, though as Sir Harry noted there was some uneasiness in the sombre eyes. He waved the woman to a chair, which she took in silence, and as her hands rested on the arms, Sir Harry noted that they were trembling. A second or two passed, in which no one spoke, then Passmore himself broke the silence impatiently.

"Well, madame, you have something to say to me? I am waiting."

Sir Harry nodded, and tremblingly the woman raised

her hands and threw back her veil. Her face was deadly white, her mouth worked pitifully with emotion, but her blue eyes were bright with accusation.

The effect on Passmore was notable. A wild incredulous look came on his face. His eyes widened with fearful amazement. He reeled back a step, and then stood as Sir Harry had seen him stand once before in that room, making gibbering sounds, his hands moving convulsively, his body shaken as by an ague. That he recognized the woman was clear, and that his dark soul was shaken by fear, none seeing him could have doubt. At last his gibbering lips achieved a single word :

“ You ? ”

“ I ! ” answered the woman with stony calm, though the blue eyes had a flame in them, and the white hands on the chair were shaking noticeably.

A moment's silence held the great room. That Passmore had suffered a knock-down blow was clear. He seemed temporarily incapable of action or speech, and stood there staring, a man reduced to helplessness, hypnotized as it appeared by the woman's dead-white face and accusing eyes. But at last his gaze shifted, wandering helplessly round the room, and as it came back to her he managed to speak haltingly in strained, shaking tones.

“ How did you . . . come here ? I . . . I thought you—had rotted in the jungle . . . long ago ? ”

“ But I did not—as you see ! ” The woman's voice had a quiver of accusation in it now. “ You thought that I had died, but God spared me to keep you from a vile thing, to save the innocent——”

The last words brought a flash of comprehension to Passmore's eyes, and suddenly himself again he swung round on Sir Harry in passion.

“ So it is you who have schemed this. You think by bringing that strumpet here to turn the tables wholly. But, by Heaven——”

“ Wait ! ” said the woman, whom he so bitterly misnamed. “ Hear me through—Lucifer. I have a double right to be heard——”



"No rights at all," cried the man hoarsely, truculently, "except those of any tavern-doxy who——"

"One right that you do not know of," interrupted the woman in turn, "a right that even you will not deny when you have heard it."

"Then out with it, woman, and begone! My bed is calling me, and it is well-nigh morning."

The woman considered a moment, and then said:

"On Christmas Eve I looked through that window there——"

"A doxy's trick!" he jeered, but the woman went on calmly:

"I saw a girl whom I had heard of in the inn, a girl who was, it seemed, a waif of the seas, saved from the wreck of the *Golden Fortune*, which is on your black soul. . . . To-night I heard that you proposed to marry her——"

"Jealous, by God!"

Passmore laughed jeeringly. That he half-believed the words he spoke was clear to Sir Harry, who wondered at the man's blindness. Then the nun continued with a calm remorselessness that astonished the man who had brought her there.

"You will never do that——"

"O-ho! You are in Plaxton's pay and call his tune!"

Then the woman lost her stony calm, and spoke quickly, passionately, with a voice that was clear and bell-like.

"You are an evil man, Lucifer. The name your vile crew gave you was well chosen. But there are limits to evil that no man can pass without God striking him. And you have reached that limit. When the *Golden Fortune* sailed from Calcutta, she carried in charge of friends a little girl-child of mine——"

"My God!"

The man fairly reeled at the shock of the revelation. There was, it was clear, no disbelief in his mind, as his eyes rested on the face and sought anew the blue eyes that now to Sir Harry, watching the tragic drama unfold, were so like the eyes of the girl of whom they spoke. He made

no protest, spoke no words beyond the exclamation that a terrific amazement had wrenched from him, and whilst he stood there, his back to the door, Sir Harry saw that door slowly, silently opening behind him, and stared at it fascinated, fearing what it would reveal. If Catherine had heard——

He did not finish the thought, but, his face expressing horrified expectation, he watched the chink between the door and the post widen inch by inch.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### A FATED MOMENT

“**S**O, were Catherine the most willing maid in the world, you know, now, why you can never marry her.”

Sir Harry caught the words with his ears, but his mind and eyes were on the moving door. It fascinated him. It seemed a most unconscionable time in opening. Would the person behind never be revealed? He had no thought of anyone but Catherine. There could be no other in this house who would so venture to intrude. She must have heard the woman's last words, and as he stared he wondered helplessly what she would do if she had heard more than that, if she had been at the door and had heard what——

His thoughts were broken off there most suddenly, for the door, so silent up to that moment, gave a little creak, and then was thrust sharply open. The person behind was not Catherine after all. It was a man—a stranger. His relief was so great that for the moment he was unable to see clearly; then as the mist caused by the rush of blood passed, he marked the man's rich and sober attire, the pallid, severe face with the burning eyes, and recognized the man whom he had seen through the inn window from the street—the guest with guineas to spend.

He caught his breath sharply as, making the recog-

nition, at the same time he remembered his own suspicion of the man's identity. But before he could speak or move, the outer door, caught by the draught, crashed noisily, and Passmore swinging round saw the stranger standing there, statuesquely, with blazing eyes fixed upon him.

For the moment Passmore was too astonished by the other's unexpected appearance to do more than stare, then his surprise shook him out of the stunned dumbness that had fallen upon him with the nun's revelation, and he cried out sharply :

" Who the devil are you ? How did you come here ? "

" Through the outer door, which stood invitingly ajar, and——"

As the stranger began to speak, the nun started, turned her head swiftly towards the speaker, then staggered to her feet. There was a wild look in her eyes, recognition and terror alike shone in them, her lips moved suddenly, a low strangled cry broke from them—a name Sir Harry thought ; then she swayed, her knees gave way, and before he could reach her, she slid to the floor in a huddled heap, unconscious.

As she had cried out, the stranger's burning eyes had gone to her face, and in them had come a startled, incredulous light. Sir Harry had seen it, and as he stooped over the fallen lady knew that, terrific as had been the shock of surprise which had driven her senseless, the surprise of that austere-faced man in the doorway had been no less. But the man made a swift recovery. Even before Sir Harry could stretch his hands to lift the unconscious woman, the stranger was speaking again as if the interruption had not occurred ; but there was a note in his voice that had not been there before.

" —And as for my name, men call me the Nabob ! "

" The Nabob ! " That Passmore recognized the name, face and voice alike showed, but there was a puzzled look in his eyes, as he replied : " I have heard of you—at Whydah ! If I were there and you came in your ship, I should give you a salute of guns ; as it is, I must ask you what you are doing here in my house, uninvited ? "

The man gave a chilling laugh.

"You shall hear that, all in good time, Lucifer. Certainly you shall hear it before I kill you. I intend that you shall."

"So!" Passmore's face grew dark as a thunder-cloud. "We stand there, do we—with the sword-points between us? You will perhaps permit me to wonder why?"

"I shall have the pleasure to make the mystery plain to you, Captain Lucifer of the *Black Adventure*, but first I will take precautions."

With great deliberation, he closed the door behind him; then drew his sword, and standing with the naked blade ready for action, he spoke again.

"You have heard of me, you owned! Yes; we have been rivals of the seas, but by some strange fortune we have never met until now—though long ago it was written in the Book of Fate that we should meet and that one of us should die."

The man's manner was utterly calm, but there was a tenseness in his utterance, a light in his eyes, which proved that calm to be but of the surface, whilst within he was raging.

"I know no reason why a meeting should be fatal to either of us."

"Then I will give you one."

As the man spoke slowly, impressively, Sir Harry looked up from the unconscious woman, stared first at one and then at the other, and waited with eager interest for the explanation.

"The cause for—shall we say—fatality? is that lady there."

He glanced at the unconscious nun, and his pale face fixed itself in hard lines.

"Oh! She is to be the occasion of our quarrel?" Passmore laughed harshly. "You have a sombre taste. She is then your fancy lady?"

"No!"

There was that in the man's tone that might have warned the other, but Roger Passmore seemed oblivious to it, and went on to gibe:

"Not your fancy lady? Then—ah, I have it! Your sister perhaps?"

"No—my wife!"

Sir Harry was so startled by the statement that he let the unconscious woman slip from his hands, but his surprise was nothing beside that of Roger Passmore.

"Your wife?" It was very clear that for the second time that night he had suffered a tremendous shock. He glanced at the unconscious woman, and from her, back to the man in front of him who stood like an avenging figure of justice, sword in hand; then he stammered again: "Did you say your wife?"

"Yes. And the knowledge should send cold prophecies through your veins, for you are about to die."

The man by the doorway lifted his sword menacingly, as he spoke, and as he did so a cunning light came in Passmore's eyes.

"You mean to fight me?"

"You can so name it if you like. I myself shall think of it as an execution."

"Oh, I have some skill with the sword," said Passmore, a little jauntily, "and I will admit you have the usual grievance of the injured husband——"

"Man, do you think I am thinking of myself?" asked the other in a voice in which there was wrathful scorn. "It is a suffering lady that I have in mind, that I have had in mind ever since the story of the *Saint Christopher* came to my ears."

"You have been long in being moved to action," sneered Passmore.

"Say rather in arriving at the moment where action is possible, you murderer of children and ravisher of the helpless."

Passmore shrank a little at the scorn in the other's voice, then whipping up his bravado answered with a shaky laugh:

"Well, the Nabob is a name of some renown on the seas where the black flag flies. It seems that we are the kettle and the pot!"



"You think so? Yet there is a difference. I have plundered ships—maybe; but no sailorman has ever walked the plank for me, and no woman has been any the worse. I have hunted with wolves, but I have not been a wolf, save where one man has been concerned, and that man I have followed as the wolf follows the blood trail that I might bring him down. . . . I have been the consort of pirates—that I might track the arch-pirate of them all. Do you understand? . . . When the news of the *Saint Christopher* came to me, I vowed that I would have vengeance on you and on all dirty rovers. I was a rich man and I bought a ship, fitted it out and manned it with men from the stews; then I put to sea to look for you. . . . But the seas are wide. When I was in African seas you were in the Archipelago, and when I heard of your ship at Whydah, my own was careened in a creek, having the weeds and barnacles cleaned from her hull. . . .

"Once in the Indian Ocean I found a burning vessel, and from a survivor on it learned that you were the rover responsible, and I saw your topsails on the horizon, but the wind died and I could not follow. . . . But why should I continue? You taunted me with dalliance—long in being moved to action, were your words; but, man, I have been in action all these years, every moment of them. I have sailed the seas with a rope about my neck, praying God that I might not be taken and hanged for a dirty pirate till I had met you and avenged my lady. I have an honourable name, and I have descended into Hell and crawled about the foulness of the Pit that I might find one of its blackest devils. . . . Now, will you charge me with being slack? . . . But what matter? Heaven has brought me to you at last, and now I shall send you to the place where you belong. . . . Are you ready, villain?"

There was that about the man which moved Sir Harry to a kind of wondering awe. He had spoken without heat of passion, but the coldness and aloofness of his statement had been the most terrible thing about it. He had, it

seemed, set some Sigurd's sword between his soul and the evil courses he had followed, conceiving himself a mere instrument of vengeance and careless of the means through which that vengeance should be achieved.

Roger Passmore also, it appeared, was conscious of that same emotion. He stared at the man in wonder, and with no little apprehension, and, as he stared, a shadow came on his face as if indeed he knew that his moment had come. But there was curiosity within him as well as apprehension, and that moved him to a last question :

" You have followed me long ! . . . How did you find me here ? "

" That also you shall know before you die, that you may see how the justice of Heaven works. . . . There is a black man who seeks you that he may kill you— Ah ! you know him ? . . . Three months ago, we met by accident in the Barbados, where I had gone to seek you, for there was a rumour among the rovers that you had deserted the sea, having stolen a great treasure from the common stock, and had hidden yourself among the tobacco-growers till you could safely make for England. All the ports were watched—and that black man was among the watchers. He it was who, a day late, discovered that you had sailed from the West, and he sought me out with the news, and with him were a handful of your old crew. So we followed. I think we over-sailed you. But we waited ; those men of your crew for the stolen treasure, and the black and I for the vengeance we desired."

" But how did you know to look for me here ? "

" Oh, that was very simple. The blackest bird turns homeward for shelter, and once in your cups as a great jest you had told how you had wrecked the *Golden Fortune*—on which—mark the ways of Heaven, man !—I had a little daughter, who perished——"

" No ! " cried Sir Harry. " She lives ! She is here, in this house."

" Lives ! Here ! "

For a moment the man's pale and austere face was

transfigured by strong emotion. The burning eyes had a hint of moisture ; then a doubt showed there.

"Are you sure, sir?" he asked. "The rumour was that all had perished!"

"Your child was saved. That man's father, who died this night, adopted her. And he—the son—would have married her, it being the old Squire's wish that so he should utterly expiate the crime of which he had been guilty. This lady—your wife, you said—heard of the projected marriage and came here to prevent it——"

"Heaven works in strange ways!" broke in the man. "That it should bring us all here together after these many years!" He swung round swiftly at the sound of a movement.

"Stand!" he snapped sharply to Passmore, who had shifted his position and was moving towards a table where a brace of pistols and a sword still attached to the belt had been thrown.

Passmore had no choice but to obey, and the Nabob addressed Sir Harry without taking his eyes from the man whom he had sought on all the seas of the world.

"I do not know you, sir, but——"

"Sir Harry Plaxton, very much at your service, since already I owe you my life."

"Oh! that affair at 'The Flask'! That was nothing; but since you are willing, I shall be grateful if you will oblige me by removing those pistols. You may leave the sword for him." He waited, whilst Sir Harry took possession of the weapons of which Passmore might make a treacherous use.

"Thank you," he said. And then added: "I wonder if you could remove that poor lady of mine? If she were to revive whilst I am killing this foul dog, after the shock she has already suffered, the further shock might do infinite harm."

Sir Harry nodded, and made a shift to lift the unconscious lady into a chair and then into his arms. As he moved towards the door, the Nabob turned and opened it, and in that same moment Passmore sprang to the table

for which he had been making, seized the sword, and dragging it from the scabbard as he ran tried to surprise the man who had followed him so far and so long.

But the other saw him coming, gave a cold laugh as he parried the treacherous thrust, and as Sir Harry stumbled into the hall with his burden, he heard the Nabob cry :

“ Now, man ! My moment and your hour are come ! ”

## CHAPTER XXIX

### A FOUL STROKE

WITH the swords ringing in his ears and the unconscious woman in his arms, Sir Harry made the stairs. There was one thought in his mind. He must deliver this poor lady to Catherine and get back to that room which must presently be a room of death, for only one of those men could leave it alive, and one he knew was capable of foulest treachery.

He reached the gallery and moved towards the door beside which Roger Passmore had made his leering jest on Christmas Eve. He kicked it softly with his foot. There was an inquiry within.

“ Who is there ? ”

“ Open, Catherine ! ” he whispered. “ There is great need. ”

Almost instantly the door was opened and Catherine in night attire with an over-robe, stared at him in alarm and wonder.

“ Whom have you there ? ” she asked as she saw the woman in his arms.

“ One who needs your help. Let me lay her on your bed, and do you care for her tenderly, Catherine, for—for she is one who has suffered much ! ”

“ Who ? . . . who ? ” asked the girl.

“ When I am gone, light the candle, dear, and look into her face ; then into your mirror. You will see a likeness that——”

“ Who is she, Sir Harry ? ”

“ A very sad lady—and your mother ! ”

“ My mother ! . . . Oh ! what——? ”

The shock of surprise was lessened by the apprehension caused by a sudden wild shout from the room below, whence came also the trampling of swift feet upon the oak and the hissing ring of steel. Sir Harry saw her eyes startled and wondering, by the light of the candles in the hall, and he spoke crisply :

“ There are two men down there—fighting, one of whom must die. I must go there. But your duty is here. . . . Let none go down. And if this poor lady revives, at all cost keep her with you. She has suffered a great shock . . . do you care for her ! ” He moved forward and in the semi-darkness laid his burden on Catherine’s bed ; then he turned swiftly.

“ I will bring a light from the hall. That will be quicker. Wait ! ”

He ran down the stairs, seized a candle from the sconce and hurried back to the tune of ringing swords. In the light he brought to her, he saw Catherine’s face very white, her eyes full of startled apprehension as she stood there in the doorway.

“ Courage ! ” he whispered, as he thrust the candle towards her. “ Shut your door and look to that poor lady within.” He saw a question trembling on her lips, but he did not stop to answer it. A crash of something upset came from below, and again he cried to her :

“ Shut your door ! ”

As it closed, he ran down the stairs again, and as he reached the room where the two men were engaged in the death-struggle, he caught Passmore’s voice through the rasping sound of steel on steel :

“ There’s a prick for you, Nabob ! If justice is on your point, she is a slow jade ! ”

Sir Harry flung himself into the room. It presented a scene of utter confusion. Chairs flung fiercely aside were overturned, a small table that lay on its side had a snapped leg, where a man had stepped ; the rugs were rucked up in a way that made them dangerous traps for the feet of men who were fighting to the death. All that Sir Harry saw in a flash, with the things of greater import. The



two men were at the farther end of the room, their swords rasping and leaping like bright flames in the candle-light. In the first, hurried, appraising glance Sir Harry's heart misgave him for the stranger. The man was fighting on the defensive, and there was a trickle of blood running down his neck from a wound under the chin, made as he divined by a thwarted thrust at the throat—a stroke of death.

The Nabob defended, and Passmore pressed the fight with a quite tremendous ferocity, a set look on his dark face, his sombre eyes glowing. With feint and side step and lightning lunges delivered at the full length of the arm, he manœuvred his opponent towards a corner of the room. The man was lithe as a panther, ferocious as a tiger, the weapon in his hand swift as a striking snake. Again and again he lunged, forcing the other to give way, once indeed to leap backward to avoid a point that carried death. At that, Passmore laughed wickedly, and Sir Harry was moved to cry a warning :

“ Oh, have a care, sir ! ”

The Nabob did not speak ; not once did he look in the direction of his counsellor, but he smiled, and that smile heartened the watcher and disturbed his opponent. A second later he leaped again—sideways, feinted, and slipping past Passmore's point was out of the corner, and as he engaged again he gave a laugh that was triumphant without being mirthful.

Passmore with a curse was at him again, fiercely as ever. The other, calm and confident, met his onslaught imperturbably, with a wrist of steel, as it seemed, turning aside the deadliest strokes, and himself apparently shrinking from attack. But it came to Sir Harry as he watched, that whilst Passmore was putting forth all his strength and skill, the Nabob, perfect in defence, was doing little, that as yet he had not made his bid for the other's life. When he made it, would it succeed ? Would he, fighting only on the defensive, wait too long ? An accident, a slip, a failure in the parry, an extra force behind one of those fierce lunges—and the penalty of delay would be paid for with his life.

The rasping of the steel filled the room with a whining sound ; now and again there was a tiny shower of pale sparks, then a blade leaped like a living thing thirsty for blood. But always Passmore's and never the Nabob's.

For minutes this proceeded ; then came a slight change. Passmore was gasping a little. Once he swept the sweat of his fierce exertions from his eyes, his lunges were less fierce and not quite so swift. That he was flagging was evident, but his opponent still bided his time, cool as ice, his face set, his burning eyes disconcerting in their stare. He left an apparent opening in his defence, and promptly Passmore took it, to learn that it was a trick, and to find himself menaced by a magnificent counter which forced him to leap backward, and throw himself into a posture of defence.

The other changed his tactics and whilst maintaining his defence began to attack. His first effort was a disturbing one for a nervous fighter, an old *foyne* of La Flamaud's, the famous Parisian master—*la botte de Nevers*—an *imbrocata* at the head, a jerky time-thrust at his opponent's brows. It failed, but the point flashing near his eyes drew from Passmore a muttered curse.

The Nabob smiled coldly and a moment or two after tried again. This time he ripped the skin ever so little, but to the man who felt the point and to Sir Harry watching, it was clear that it might have done more had the director of the point so willed.

So far, but for the taunting words Sir Harry had overheard and Passmore's curse, neither had spoken. The fight had gone in silence, save for the hissing of the tempered blades and the stamping of shod feet on the oak. But now the Nabob broke the silence :

“ Do you know that *foyne* of Caizo the Italian—the *falso manco* ? Maybe you would like to learn it, though I fear you will have little use for it in Hell ? But still——” He acted with lightning speed. His blade shot downward in a left-handed drawing cut inside the other's knee, so swiftly indeed that though the other had warning he did nothing.

The stroke was followed by another oath from Pass-

more, whose face had become the colour of china clay, and from the inside of his knee as he retreated ran a little trickle of blood which presently splashed upon the oaken floor. The Nabob's cold smile flashed again.

"You were in danger then, Lucifer, of becoming a cripple for your life. You know it, hey? But if I had hamstrung you, then I could not have killed you. One cannot spit a fallen man. So——"

"Curse you!" cried Passmore gaspingly, though to Sir Harry the fear was naked in his eyes.

The Nabob nodded, and easily parried a desperate lunge.

"Ah, you begin to be afraid, Lucifer! It is written in your face, in your eyes! . . ." He lunged himself, foot forward, arm and sword in line, and laughed coldly at the other's leap.

" . . . I wonder in the eyes of how many men you have seen the fear grow . . . and in how many of women have seen it leap? . . . But now you shall pay them all—and one lady that was very dear to me . . . I wonder if I could make you cry aloud for mercy? . . . There is that trick of Tappa, the Milanese, by which he was reputed to rip out the eyes. . . . A lunging thrust to widen the defence . . . thus!"

He made it as he spoke, followed with a quick *imbrocato* at the head, nails down, a double reverse of the point, and then as the other cried out, he stepped back.

"Do not fear, Lucifer! You are but pricked in an eyelid. One does not run through a blind man—even if he has sought him for as many years as I have sought you. . . . But you feel the coldness at the heart—hey? . . . You begin to think of your sins and to wish they were not so great a multitude? . . . I wonder if you would like a confessor?—or would you prefer another lesson in the art of fence? . . . There is a thrust you will not know——"

He broke off and laughed his chilling, freezing laugh, as Passmore, wrought up to panic, leaped backward twice, to avoid he knew not what horror. Sir Harry, watching, shivered. It was clear to him now that the Nabob,

avenger of Justice as he was, held the other's life at his sword-point whenever he chose to take it, and that he was deliberately delaying the death-dealing stroke, playing cat-and-mouse, to punish the man utterly before he slew him. But for Passmore's utter blackness, he could have pitied the man, and as it was prayed that the Nabob would be quick. But the latter moved forward to re-engage, leisurely, speaking in that chill, rallying tone.

"—That thrust. . . . It was taught me by a drunken fencing-master in the Barbados . . . a man who but for the rum would have been a very prince of his art. Even when drunk he could slit a button with it . . . that button there . . . over the heart——"

"My God !"

Roger Passmore, utterly shaken, fairly sobbed the words, as he strove to fence off some terrible thrust. There was horror in his eyes, as fascinated he watched the other's point, dark with his own blood, and as he gave ground his foot caught in one of the rucked-up rugs and he stumbled on his knees.

The other dropped his point, and with mock courteousness waited.

"It is not possible, dear Lucifer, to teach the stroke to a man at his prayers. A man must be on his feet. When you are ready——"

Passmore lifted one foot and paused, resting on one knee, looking at the other ragingly and fearfully. It seemed that he was taking advantage of the other's fairness to breathe himself, but whilst he knelt there, the watchful Sir Harry saw a cunning look creep into the apprehensive eyes and divined some treachery on his part, without being able to guess the form it might take. But so sure was he that he was moved to shout a warning :

"Beware, sir !"

The word had scarcely crossed his lips when the thing happened.

Roger Passmore, sword in hand, rose swiftly to his feet, and as he rose his left hand dragged up the rug on which he had stumbled, in a single motion throwing it forward on

the other's point. Then, swift as the lightning flash, he leaped in, running his antagonist clean through. A great cry broke from the victim of the foul and treacherous act, as he fell to the oak and after writhing a moment lay still, with his eyes closed. Sir Harry with a horrified cry ran forward, and stooped over the fallen man. The life seemed gone from him, and he looked up at Passmore, who stood there, the sweat mingling with the blood running down his white face, his eyes wide and staring, his breath coming gaspingly through his mouth open like that of a choking fish.

"You traitorous hound!" he said in a scorn that cut the other like a whip. "The other night, me—and now this man! How you can know it of yourself and live——"

He broke off. There were sounds on the stairs, voices on the gallery above.

"Shut the door!" he cried sharply.

Passmore did not move. He stood there with the bloodied rapier in his hand, and in a voice from which all the timbre had gone, and which was utterly flat and sepulchral he spoke:

"It is too late!"

It was the truth. Already Catherine and her mother were almost at the door, and whilst the two men remained there, Sir Harry on his knees, spellbound with horror, Passmore on his feet, an expression on his face that might have been found on the face of the damned, the two stepped into the room. The nun, her face very white, her eyes bright with mortal fear, looked round. They went first to the bloody rapier in Passmore's hand, then to the man lying on the floor, with Sir Harry by his side, and then back to Passmore. For a moment there was a great silence, then in a voice which was most unnaturally calm she spoke:

"So! you have killed him."

"By the foulest stroke, madame," cried Sir Harry.

"It would be," she whispered. "It would be!" Then her voice rose again and still utterly calm she said: "You have wrought us the last injury!" . . . A flame came in her eyes, a surge of emotion shook her; then she added



in tones that made the words sevenfold more terrible :  
“ May God curse you ! ”

She turned her eyes away as from a loathly thing, and without looking at him again she crossed the room to the fallen man, fell on her knees beside him, took his head in her lap and kissed him.

“ My dear ! ” she whispered brokenly. “ My dear ! ”

Sir Harry rose to his feet, and looked at Passmore, who still stood there, glued as it seemed to the floor. Catherine moved farther into the room.

“ That man ? ” she asked Sir Harry with a sob. “ He was my father ? ”

“ Yes ! ”

“ Then——”

Her blue eyes turned to Passmore, and an expression of exceeding loathing came in them. Even Passmore's brazen villainy was not proof against that look. His eyes fell, the blood came back to his face in a surge that dyed it purple, and as the girl turned away he walked slowly from the room. As he went, there was a scurry of feet on the gallery—the frightened servants fleeing at his approach, and then Sir Harry crossed the room and closed the door.

As he turned round he saw Catherine fall on her knees beside her mother, then the latter gave a quick movement, and rested her ear on the prone man's breast. A moment later she was on her feet, her eyes shining with hope, her face transfigured.

“ Oh, sir ! ” she cried whisperingly. “ He lives ! He lives ! ”

Sir Harry ran to the fallen man, tore open his coat and silk vest, ripped the lace cravat away, and put a hand on his bare chest. The heart was beating faintly.

“ You are right,” he said. Then he dragged the shirt further aside and found the wound. It was high up, and the blood was welling. He turned to Catherine.

“ Get me water, hot, and bandages. There is hope if we can stop the blood. Oh, quick ! ”

The girl ran, and whilst she was gone Sir Harry strove to check the bleeding by pressing the wound with the man's cravat of priceless lace. He knelt there, unspeaking,

until the girl returned with a large bowl of water and half an armful of linen. Then he washed the wound carefully, and bandaged it tightly, and that done, looked round.

"Cushions, Catherine. It will be well to let him lie still for the present."

He arranged the cushions under head and shoulders, and that done spoke again :

"A little spirit. It may revive him."

There was brandy in the room, and the girl brought the decanter and a glass, and very carefully he administered a few drops, and waited. A faint colour came back into the white face, and presently the eyelids fluttered a little.

"He will revive soon," he said. "God grant that he may live. I think he will, but that man out there must not know."

He stood up, and as he did so caught a sound of cautious feet going along the hall. They must have come down the stairs, he thought, but, absorbed in his task, he had not noticed them. He listened carefully. The steps continued in the direction of the entrance, and were lost as the door was closed softly.

Catherine caught the sound of the closing door, and looked up at him, a question in her eye.

"Yes!" he said. "I think that he is gone. He will never return. He will not dare!"

The sound of feet came to him again, this time on the gravel outside, and he swung swiftly round and stared at the window, to see Roger Passmore as he thought pass to final exile. A man's slinking form outlined itself dimly in the light from the window; then the man's head turned, and he glimpsed not the face of the man he expected, but a black countenance in which the eyeballs seemed preternaturally large. A startled cry broke from him at the sight.

"What is it?" asked Catherine quickly. "What——"

He did not heed her. Already he was running for the door. He reached it: flung it open, and ran along the hall, not in the direction of the entrance, but of the stairs, which he mounted at breakneck speed, and then raced along the gallery, spurred by a tragic expectation.

## CHAPTER XXX

## WILD JUSTICE

**R**UNNING along the gallery, Sir Harry reached the door of the room which he knew for Roger Passmore's, and found the door ajar. For a moment he paused to listen, then, gently, he thrust the door open. The room was in darkness, with the curtains drawn, and very still. He peered round. He could see nothing, but to his nostrils came the odour of an extinguished candle, which must have smouldered for a little time after the flame had gone, and he knew that very recently someone had been in that room.

He moved forward towards the window, and as he did so, his foot caught something bulky which lay on the floor between him and the window. He stopped, stood quite still for a moment ; then he stooped and touched the thing which lay there.

He straightened himself sharply, and did not pursue his intention of drawing aside the curtains ; instead he went out of the room, and descended the stairs slowly. When he reached the hall, for the second time that night he raided the sconce for a candle, and turned to remount the stairs once more. As he did so, he saw Catherine standing in the doorway of the room where the wounded man lay. There was a silent question in her eyes, which he refused to understand, and without a word he continued on his way, mounting the stairs slowly, very certain what he would find in that silent room at the far end of the gallery.

When he reached it again, he stood for a second before entering, then stepped inside, and looked down at the bulky thing upon the floor.

Roger Passmore lay there, his sombre eyes wide open, a look of horror stamped on his dead face, and a seaman's knife in his heart.

Sir Harry was not surprised. Since he had listened to the furtive steps passing along the hall and had seen the blackamoor's face through the window he had been quite

sure that something of the sort had happened, and when in the darkness he had touched the thing that lay on the floor, conviction had become knowledge. He stood there looking at the dead man, thinking to himself that Passmore had paid for all his crimes by the vengeance that had overtaken him for what was one of the least of his evil deeds. He had feared the black man more than he had feared all his other enemies. He had been confident that he could buy the others off, but he had been assured of the utter implacableness of the man whom he had ordered to be whipped, and had afterwards left lashed to the whipping-post under the blazing sun of Africa, at the mercy of the myriad flies ; and his assurance had been vindicated. By an act most foul, he had escaped the sword of the man who more than all other men had the right to execute summary personal justice upon him, and he had fallen to the knife of the man of an inferior race, whom once no doubt he had held in mean esteem, but who had sown the seeds of fear in his evil heart, and at the last had wrought vengeance for the suffering he had endured.

He looked round the room, trying to reconstruct the last moments of the slain man's life. That was not difficult. A pair of saddle-bags were on the bed, partly packed. Drawers stood open with the contents jumbled. Clothing was tossed carelessly upon the floor, and against a chair by the window, its blood-stained point on the oak, stood the sword with which he had made that foul stroke.

It was clear that he had been preparing to leave Wyke, having, no doubt, recognized the utter hopelessness of all that he had planned, and the folly of attempting to maintain his position there. The half-packed saddle-bags declared his intention had been to go a-horseback, and as Sir Harry remembered the man's promise to go by coach with Hornygold, he realized that once more the man had meant to play the Judas part, and leave his old associate and quartermaster to suffer.

But how had death overtaken him ? By utter and complete surprise, surely, for there were pistols on the dressing-table, and a leap would have carried him to that

blood-stained sword resting against the chair. He had had time neither to reach for the pistols nor to leap for the sword. Judging from the position in which he lay, he had probably been stooping over the saddle-bags on the bed, had caught some sound or had heard the door open, and had straightened himself and turned to see who entered, to look once in fearful surprise in the dusky face of the implacable blackamoor, and then had suffered that straight, sure stroke of the knife.

But there had been a moment when his dark soul shook—the look on the dead face showed that—a moment when all the terrors of death that he had experienced in the room downstairs, before he had delivered himself by that foul stroke, had focused themselves in a single blazing point, and with the moment the terrific premonition had been fulfilled.

Sir Harry looked round again, and his thought went to the man who had wrought this deed of wild justice. Had he and the Nabob come to the house together? He recalled the horse in the shrubbery, and now knew that he had been mistaken. That had not been Passmore's horse left there in preparation for flight; it had been the Nabob's, who had ridden here to seek justice at the sword-point. But the man had not ridden alone. He remembered the two figures the nun and he had seen as they had approached the house and whom he had taken to be two of the watchers whom Passmore had engaged. The man downstairs and the man who had wrought this vengeance had arrived at the house together. Had they so conspired that if Roger Passmore should escape the sword of the one, he should fall by the knife of the other?

Sir Harry could not believe that. The wounded man downstairs was of too high a spirit to enter into such a compact, and he had been too sure of his own ability to bring Passmore to book to trouble to arrange for the other to accomplish in a meaner way what he himself could do after the fashion of gentlemen. Doubtless the black had accompanied him, to keep watch, possibly to guard against interference, and from the terrace had seen the



foul stroke which had put his companion out of the fight.

Then he had crept silently into the house, had lingered furtively in the shadows, until Passmore had mounted the stairs, and when opportunity had served, with the knife in his hand had followed, creeping furtively along the gallery, and had taken in complete surprise the man whom he had followed across the zones, slaying him wordlessly, or with a whisper that only his victim heard.

As he stood there reflecting, looking down on the dead man whose gold ear-rings glistened in the candle-light, the wax of the candle dribbled down his fingers and dripped to the floor unheeded. He found his mind searching for a phrase of Holy Writ, and presently it came to him :

“ Vengeance is mine, I will repay ! ”

Here perhaps was the vengeance of God wrought by the hand of man ! In any case——

A sound broke on his meditation, a light step outside the door. He turned swiftly. Catherine stood there, and he cried out to her :

“ Go back, my dear ! Quick ! This is no place —— ”

But she had already seen. Her eyes told him that ; and as she stood there, wavering, shivering, swaying as the tall corn sways in the breeze, he dropped the guttering candle and sprang to save her from falling.

He was in time. He caught her in his arms, and held her close whilst she sobbed and shook with the horror of the thing that she had seen. Then broken words came from her :

“ He . . . he . . . is—— ”

“ Yes ! The blackamoor ! You understand ? He was afraid of him always, and at the last—— ”

“ Oh ! ” she sobbed. “ It is . . . terrible ! ”

“ Yes ! But it might have been more terrible had it not happened so. The evil man has escaped the worst. He will be buried in a peace that he does not deserve, instead of his bones rattling in chains. Come, let me take you away. I will call the servants and make the necessary arrangements.”

"If my uncle——" she began sobbingly.

"You may thank God he died to-night," he said quietly. "He was saved from bitter knowledge—knowledge that you must forget, speedily. Come, my dear."

But she was too shaken for her feet to fulfil their office. She stumbled as he began to lead her from the gallery, and gathering her in his arms, he carried her down the wide stairs to the room where the nun, her mother, still knelt by the Nabob's side.

The fallen man's eyes were open, and he was whispering brokenly.

"All the years, Catherine . . . I followed . . . for your sake. . . . I found a man who knew the story of how that fiend had driven you forth. . . . I conceived you dead . . . slain by savage men or wild beasts . . . or perished of hunger in the wilderness. . . . I had no hope that you lived . . . never a thought but that our little one had perished. . . . And now . . ."

The nun on her knees was weeping silently, and it came to Sir Harry as he stood, uncertainly, with the girl in his arms, that here were two who had loved each other with a love that still lived; that even in this terrible hour found joy in itself. He looked at the half-fainting girl in his arms, and knowing there was much to be done, whispered to her:

"Be strong, my dear. Here is an end of our troubles and—joy cometh."

He laid her gently in the great chair by the fire, and moved quietly towards the fallen man, whose eyes met his questioningly.

"That villain? . . . He has gone?"

"Gone indeed!" said Sir Harry significantly.

"Ah! So?"

"Yes! The black who was with you——"

"I had forgotten him! . . . I—left him outside—to keep watch."

"So much I guessed. He must have seen and entered the house. I heard him go, saw him outside there for a moment, and—well, the man you knew as Lucifer lies upstairs with a knife in his heart."

"So? . . . Heaven foiled his escape and vengeance is wrought by another hand than mine."

"What matter, sir? . . . But I think we must leave this house of death. You must go where you can lie quiet, if you are to recover——"

"You think that I shall live?"

"Yes! If you are careful to avoid a fever. The wound is high and touches no vital part."

"But where can we go?" asked the woman quickly.

"To my house, madame, where you will be most welcome. If you will excuse me I will go seek help."

He left the room to call the servants, but he called in vain. They, more aware of events than he had guessed, had fled in fear, and save those in the room, himself, and the dead upstairs, the house was empty.

But he had better luck as he went to the stables, with the intention of harnessing the horses in the coach, for he found the cottage where the gardener lived all alight, and the scared servants huddling there in fear, with the man and his wife. The gardener was a fellow of some nerve, and his wife a phlegmatic woman not easily shaken, and they accompanied him back to the house, where the woman busied herself with Catherine, whilst the man helped to lift Roger Passmore on to his bed, and then returned to the stables to prepare the coach.

In twenty minutes or so it was standing at the door, and, having packed it carefully with cushions, they lifted the wounded man into it, whilst the nun took her place by his side.

"Catherine?" she asked. "There is just room——"

"No," answered Sir Harry quickly. "Your husband will be cramped. Catherine shall ride with me when I am ready. My horse is here, and your husband's horse is in the shrubbery. . . . I will give this man instructions for my housekeeper, who will make you very welcome."

He turned to the man, who had already mounted the box. "I had forgotten," he said sharply. "The gates are locked!"

"But I have the key," answered the gardener.

“ Good ! ” said Sir Harry.

He went back to Catherine, who was standing in the doorway.

“ We shall ride together,” he said. “ But first I must extinguish the candles and lock the door.”

He returned inside, drew all the curtains, blew out the candles, and having locked the door, stood with the key in his hand for a moment whilst he considered. Then he spoke to the gardener’s wife :

“ Those maids will not come back here, I suppose ? I will take the key with me, and in the morning I will report the happenings here to the nearest magistrate. . . . And now for the stables again.”

With the girl on his arm, he led the way, and finding his own horse, saddled it, then lifted Catherine on to it.

“ There is another horse in the shrubbery,” he said. “ The one your father brought. I can ride that.”

He took the bridle and led the horse gently forward. Under the risen moon it was easy to find his way, but when he arrived at the place where the horse had been tethered, it was gone. He stared in some surprise, then the explanation came to him.

“ I suppose that man—Black Tom—took it, to help him to escape. It was your father’s horse, but he will not grudge it. And to us it is of no moment.”

He led the horse forward, down the drive and out of the gates, and as they reached them glanced in the direction of the sea. The moonlight rippled on the waters, lit all the Bay from the Ness to the Peak, and the wide stretch beyond. He checked the horse and searched carefully. The sea was empty, the lugger gone. He drew a long breath of relief.

“ Those men will trouble us no more,” he said, and led the horse forward.

In less than half an hour they were at the gates of the Priory, where they met the coach returning.

“ You got through all right, my man ? ” he asked.

“ First rate, Sir Harry, and the gentleman has revived wonderfully. When we got him out of the coach, he

insisted on walking into the house, an' hopped in just as lively as a cricket."

"Good! I will see you in the morning, gardener. Good night."

"Good night, sir. Good night, Miss Catherine!"

He drove on, but Sir Harry himself made no move. He stood there for a space in the moonlight, considering, whilst Catherine, huddled in her cloak, watched him a little curiously, wondering what was in his mind; then suddenly he spoke.

"My dear!" he said, "this has been a night of terror for you."

"Yes!" she whispered.

"A night of sorrow also. . . . But I should like you to have one happy memory of the night."

"But how can that be?" she asked.

"You remember how you rode here with me on Christmas morning?"

"What infinite ages ago!"

"I told you of a dream of my youth. . . . How always, when I played the hero, it was to this house I rode . . . with the lady of my dreams . . . in my arms."

"Yes," she whispered tremulously. "What——"

"Why," he said, "here and now you may give the dream complete fulfilment. . . . Catherine? Catherine?"

She looked down at him, her eyes in the moonlight bright with love; then she slid from the saddle to his arms.

A little while after, he spoke again.

"It is but a little way to walk. But we will give the dream reality."

He climbed into the saddle, leaving an empty stirrup for her; then he held out his hands.

"Come, my sweeting."

She put a foot in the stirrup, and with her hands in his was swung in front of him. Then with one arm about her, and both hers around his neck, they rode forward through the moonlight snatching their joy under the shadow of sorrow.



## CHAPTER XXXI

## A MERRY MATING

THEY found the Nabob already abed, asleep, with his wife watching by his side.

"Your housekeeper found me a sleeping-potion made from some country simples," she explained. "It acted like a charm. I hope Richard will do well. He has suffered much for me."

"Little fear of that, I think," said Sir Harry cheerfully. "I have seen worse wounds than his from which men have recovered quickly. And joy is a great medicine, madame."

"Joy?" she whispered.

"What else, madame? After these many years of darkness he has found you—and Catherine. Do you think he will not be glad?"

"But—oh, you forget! Those years for him—you heard him tell that evil man? And those years of sorrow of mine—will they not divide us like a sword?"

"No!" he said stubbornly. "It is you who forget. Here is Catherine! She belongs to you both. You will not deprive her of the joy which is hers, nor will you, if you are wise, let the memories of darkness spoil the new day. I am sure your husband will not. What he did, he did for you, remember, and I have known few men who would have done as much for love. So have no fear, lady. Your watch through the night will have a happy ending, as my ride from that house of darkness has had."

The woman looked at him with a swift question in her eyes.

"Yes!" he said. "Even to-night! I would not be denied, knowing as I do that joy can blot out the memory of sorrow. But I must leave you with Catherine for a little time, if you will excuse me. There is a thing that I have yet to do."

"To-night?" asked Catherine quickly. "It is very late."

"It will not keep till morning, I am afraid. Down at the sexton's there is that man Hornygold. He is waiting for the coach that was to take him to safety, as Roger Passmore promised. He will be a desperate man when the coach fails him; and the sexton is what he called him

—a sheep. I should not like anything to happen to the sexton. There has been sufficient tragedy for one night, so I must ride down there and make arrangements for the rover's removal. He deserves no pity, but there is another I am thinking of."

"Ah! my husband?"

Sir Harry nodded.

"Yes, if Hornygold is taken, he will drag down all he can with him, and may try to involve your husband. So I must save the rascal's neck."

"You know what is best. I shall thank God for you to the day I die!"

"You forget, madame, that I have my reward." He bowed himself out of the room, and a quarter of an hour later rode in the direction of Bay Town once more. His brow was creased in a thoughtful frown. Hornygold was something of a problem. If the man should prove unfit to travel he would have to be concealed somewhere, for if Mackworth heard of him it was certain that he would take him, and once in the hands of the law Hornygold would seek to save his own neck by betraying his associates. And for Catherine's father, Sir Harry, apart from his relationship to her, was genuinely concerned. The man had suffered much, and the way he had taken, however culpable, had been the one way by which he could avenge the wrong done to Catherine's mother. Even at the cost of saving Hornygold from the gallows, the Nabob and his must be spared further suffering.

But there was the sexton! He knew of the reward offered long ago, and Hornygold—the quartermaster of the *Black Adventure*—was a prize representing substantial guineas. He would have to be bribed, and possibly if the bribe were sufficiently heavy he might even harbour the man who had put him to the torture. He was of the type of man whose god was money. . . .

Reflecting on these problems, he came to the hill above the sexton's cottage, and as he did so chanced to glance in the direction of the sea. Something moving in the direction of Bay Ness caught his eyes, and he looked at it

more closely. It was directly in the long shimmering path the moonlight made upon the sea—a black shadow in the silver light, a rowing-boat being driven at a smart pace. He wondered idly what men were in the boat. Some of the free-traders of the town, he thought, going forth secretly in the night to some secret storing-place of contraband, or possibly the Revenue officers on the business of the lugger, which now he thought must be far out at sea.

He turned his horse downhill and coming to the sexton's cottage saw it was in darkness. He knocked upon the door without response from within. He tried again, using his riding-switch and making a rat-a-tat that resounded in the still night, and must have roused anyone sleeping in the cottage. His summons remained unanswered, and with new fears surging within him, he led his horse to the rear of the house.

The door was closed, but when he lifted the latch and set his shoulder against the door it opened, and he stood listening. He could hear nothing, and his fears became sharper. Either Mackworth had discovered Hornygold's presence, or the sexton, disturbed by the non-arrival of the promised coach, and moved by cupidity, had betrayed the wounded man. In either case——

A slight sound reached him from the interior of the house breaking on his reflections. He listened intently. Yes! there it was again. He called out:

“Sexton! Sexton! Are you there?”

The sound came again, a dull dead sound, which he could in no way explain, but which seemed to come from overhead. In a twinkling he tethered his horse to the door-latch, and, pistol in hand, stepped inside. He remembered the position of the stone stairs, and in the semi-darkness had no difficulty in finding them. He began to mount, and when he reached the room into which they opened directly, looked swiftly round and dimly made out a truckle-bed with the form of a man lying upon it, apparently helpless. There was no one else in the room.

He strode across the uncarpeted, creaking boards to the

window, and dragged aside the curtain, letting in a flood of moonlight ; then he looked at the man on the bed. It was the sexton, bound hand and foot, and so efficiently gagged that he was near to being suffocated.

Sir Harry wasted no time. His first care was to remove the gag, and that done to cut the man's bonds. Then he asked his question :

" What's happened, bedman ? "

The sexton gulped. " Water ! I must ha'——"

He rolled off the bed and stumbled down the stairs, followed by Sir Harry. Below, the sexton found a bucket and a dipper, and gulped water thirstily. His visitor waited until he had drunk his fill, and when at last the dipper was set down he repeated his question, with an addition :

" What has happened ? Where's Hornygold ? "

" Gone ! Those devils came back ! . . . My stars ! If I'd but known ! "

" Known what ? Did they take Hornygold ? "

" Took the devil, yes, an' good riddance ; but they took *it*, too ! "

" Go into your kitchen," said Sir Harry impatiently ; and followed the man into the living-room. " Now make a light. You've got candles and a tinder-box somewhere I expect."

The sexton found the required things, muttering brokenly to himself all the while, and when he had lit a couple of candles Sir Harry tackled him again.

" Now a plain tale, bedman. What has happened ? "

" My God ! " broke out the sexton. " It was here all the time—that winking glory, an' I never knew it. Twice this night has a fortin been in my grasp——"

" Do you mean that jewelled peacock was left here when those rovers fled ? "

" Just that ! An' hid in the simplest place imaginable, only I didn't know it ! But when all was quiet an' Hornygold was cursin' shocking because Passmore hadn't come with the coach as he'd covenanted, those devils came back to look for it. This time they came as quiet as

mice an' took me like a lamb ; then one of them vowed he'd cut my tongue out if I didn't own up where it was. I said I hadn't got it, but that I'd got the wounded man on my bed upstairs who'd had it in his arms when they'd started to run, an' that maybe he'd know something about it."

" ' Hornygold ! By the powers ! ' shouted one of them. ' He'll have it safe.'

" The fellow snatched a candle an' him an' another ran upstairs, whilst the others stood here watching me. I could hear 'em confabbing with Hornygold, none too quietly, an' it seemed that he wasn't for trusting them overmuch, for when they came down, one of 'em told the others.

" ' Horny knows. He says the golden bird is safe, but he isn't passing the information where it is except on conditions.'

" ' Conditions ? ' growls one of the others.

" ' He's scared we'll leave him here to be taken by those d——d riding-officers, so two or three of us have got to get him safely down to the boat, and once there he'll tell, an' we can get it. He swears we'll do that easy, and yet vows that without his word we'll never find it till the crack of doom.'

" ' Then we've just got to get Horny down,' says one o' them. ' And there's no need for growls. There isn't one of us but would act the same to save himself. Who's going and who's stopping to keep an eye on this frizzled billy-goat ? '

" He meant me, and one o' them said they'd soon settle my hash ; and two o' them started to tie me up, an' t'others fetched Hornygold downstairs an' carried him forth. After awhile they came back, an' one o' them snatches the candle an' goes into the back place there, an' then shouts :

" ' It's here ! Where Horny put it.'

" It was in that open place under the stairs ! If a man had chanced to look that way, he must have seen it. An' there's a marvellous fortin lost twice in a night——"



"And your life saved, sexton. Remember that! It wouldn't have been worth two minutes' purchase if you had taken that jewelled thing."

"Lor', an' don't I know it? But a man's bound to have his regrets when he thinks of that shining wonder——"

"Possibly! But now, listen to me! You have got to keep what you know to yourself——"

"About the young Squire, you mean?"

"Yes! He is dead!"

"Dead! My God!" The sexton's jaw dropped. "Those fiends killed him?"

"One of them—who was not with the crew when they came here—stabbed him to the heart. So you can imagine what your chances would have been, and what is like to happen to a man who lets his tongue wag freely about this affair. The less said the better, I think."

"Me, too!" said the sexton fervently.

"The going of Hornygold, Roger Passmore being dead, is a fortunate thing——"

"But that reward——" burst out the sexton.

"But your throat, bedman!" countered Sir Harry grimly. "Think of that—and take care of it. Those rascals are overhandy with a knife."

"Wild horses shan't make me talk."

"Good! I'll not disguise from you that I want your secrecy. I am going to marry Miss Catherine——"

"Lor' bless me, Sir Harry."

"That is no secret. You can spread it far and wide, if you like. But the other thing you must bury with Roger Passmore and the old Squire—for my lady's sake."

"Don't worry, sir; I know how my bread's buttered." Sir Harry laughed.

"I'll add to the butter," he said. "So long as you keep the secret you learned to-night, I'll double your wages as sexton."

"Now, that's real handsome, Sir Harry."

"Better than a slit throat, anyway——"

Sir Harry checked sharply as a dull booming sound

broke on the stillness of the night. A second later, as the sound was repeated, he shouted :

“ Guns! An engagement! Mackworth’s cutter or——”

The next moment he was running for the door with the sexton at his heels. As he passed the threshold, he turned eagerly to the moonlit sea. The cottage stood high and the view was wide ; and some distance out, like a dark shadow on the shimmering water, he discerned the outline of a large vessel, which, even as he watched, seemed to belch a dozen tongues of murky flame, whilst there followed a thunderous roar of guns.

“ A King’s ship ! ” he shouted exultantly. “ Here’s an end of Lucifer’s pirates ! ”

He searched in vain for the lugger, which he divined must be the target of those thundering guns—then, leaping on his horse he rode recklessly to the cliff above the Bay, to get a clearer view. He found the Bay men flocking there, and as he reached the point of vantage came suddenly on Mackworth.

“ They’ve got the rascals, Sir Harry,” shouted the Revenue officer. “ That’s the *Lion* frigate. She carries twenty guns——”

The crashing roar of the guns broke on his words ; the spectators shouted with excitement, and Sir Harry cried :

“ Where’s the lugger ? ”

“ There in a line with the *Raven*,” yelled a voice that he recognized for Peter Harland’s. “ She’s winged and going down by the stern. Another broadside an’ there’ll be an end of her.”

Sir Harry stared in the direction indicated, and full in the moonlight descried the lugger, her masts shot away, a mere hulk on the shimmering sea. Even as he saw her, a solitary gun upon her deck spat flame and defiance at the King’s ship which was manœuvring for position to fire her other broadside.

“ The rascals have pluck ! ” cried Mackworth. “ But it’s the sea or the rope with them. Either way they haven’t a dog’s chance.”

Again the spurt of flame showed murkily, the boom of

the solitary gun sounded ; then as the frigate finished her turning movement, the roaring broadside crashed and, as the reverberations died away, in the quiet that followed the sound of yells was borne faintly across the water.

A cloud of smoke obscured the view, drifting low on the face of the sea, hiding the combatants from view. Two or three minutes passed, whilst the excited spectators speculated wildly as to what had happened ; then the smoke drifted clear, revealing only the frigate.

“ The lugger’s gone ! ” cried Harland.

“ An’ that golden miracle of a bird with her,” moaned the bedman at Sir Harry’s elbow. “ Lord ! what a sinful waste ! ”

“ They’re lowering a boat from the frigate,” said Mackworth, with a spy-glass at his eye, “ but they’ll have to send her to Davy Jones’s locker to find those devils.”

Sir Harry climbed back into his saddle. From its height he surveyed once more the shimmering waters, and knew that the Revenue officer was right. Tortuga and Hornygold and the rest would trouble no more the tall merchantmen going on their lawful occasions. To such an end, he thought, the Golden Peacock, the greatest treasure of the Indies, was well lost, and knowing now that the Nabob’s secret was quite safe, well content, he set his mount to the homeward way.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was the morning of Old Christmas Day, a clear mild day, with the sun lighting the Bay with beauty and the promise of turning seasons, when Sir Harry, walking in the front of his house, heard a step behind him, and saw the Nabob approaching him. One arm was in a sling ; his steps were a little uncertain, and his face, much thinner than it had been on the occasion when Sir Harry had first seen it through the inn-window, still wore the strange pallor that characterized it. But there was an indefinable change on it that arrested Sir Harry’s attention, and after a moment he realized what it was. The eyes had lost their burning look, and had now a mild, benign expression,

which altered the man's whole appearance. As he drew near Sir Harry offered his arm, and the other took it and began to speak.

"I have come to tell you our plans, Harry. I have persuaded Catherine at last that nothing that has happened must come between us, that no vows she took under misapprehension can cancel the earlier vows which she and I made together."

"I am glad of that, sir," answered Sir Harry earnestly.

"As I have told you, I have an estate in Cumberland. It has not seen me these many years, but after your marriage, my wife and I are to go there, to rebuild the ruins of our happiness, which suffered its first shattering blow when the *Golden Fortune* came ashore here."

"Yes, I understand. It is a good augury, sir, that the rebuilding should begin here."

"Why, I think that also!" replied the Nabob. "I came to exact vengeance—and found anew those of whom life had robbed me, and the love that I had thought was lost for ever." He looked towards the sunlit sea, and a gentle melancholy came in his face; then he said quietly: "I wonder can I redeem the lost years?"

"With your lady, sir——"

"Why, yes!" The other's tone quickened. "Where we are going, up among the misty fells, where none will come who knew the Nabob, we can win together a name of honour. There are things I can do up there among the moorland folk——"

"Here comes madame," broke in Sir Harry. Then his voice took a joyous lilt. "And Catherine."

"Yours!" The Nabob smiled on the word. "My son, you should be very happy."

\* \* \* \* \*

That same morning Sir Harry and Catherine rode down to Bay Town together to consult with Peter Harland, and found him in very cheerful mind.

"Oh! the Bay's to give ye a proper wedding, Miss Catherine. Ye've belonged to it ever since the sea cast

ye up to us, an' every woman'll think of ye as of her own lass that day ; an' every man'll wear his favour. We'll have gay doings, an' what's more the heart'll be in them. I reckon that Officer Mackworth'll look another way the day : an' if we don't make the riding-officers merry with good liquor that never paid a stiver to the King, why ye can name me for a Dutchman."

Catherine laughed.

" I think you will always be a Yorkshireman, Peter."

" An' a Bay man, first, Miss Catherine, same as your man that's-to-be. We've ta'en him to our hearts—where ye've always been."

Sir Harry laughed, but found pleasure in the words, and nodded his acknowledgment.

" All right, Peter, I'm of the lodge, if you'll have me ! . . . And things are in your hands. No stinting, remember ! "

" Devil a stint, Sir Harry ! " laughed the innkeeper back, and stood to watch them as they set their horses to the bank. Others watched them also from windows and from doorways, until they drew clear of the town and came near the house where lived the woman who on Christmas Day had cried her warning to the girl. The woman was at her door, and as she looked at the riders, her wrinkled face broke into a smile. She waved a genial hand.

" Good luck to ye, lass ! An' a merry mating ! "

Catherine smiled and waved back, and then caught Sir Harry's eyes.

" Good luck to ye, lass ! " he echoed in a whisper, and saw her eyes brim suddenly with bright tears of happiness, as she whispered back :

" It seems I have all the luck in the world ! "









